

Blanchot's "Impossible" Kafka

Antoine J. Polgar

Southern New Hampshire University and Empire State College

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Abstract: In his article "Blanchot's Impossible Kafka" Antoine J. Polgar challenges Maurice Blanchot's theory of the impossibility and futility of writing as applied to Kafka's struggles with the demands of writing and life. Polgar questions Blanchot's claims on the basis of close readings of the texts of Kafka's texts and explores traces of correspondence between the life and the texts yet unmentioned in Kafka scholarship. Referring to Blanchot's focus on survival as a metaphor for writing in a meta-commentary on the writer's facticity and the contingency to which literary creation is consigned, Polgar comments on the intense bio-critical interest — which the scholar is cautioned against and often ignores — in Kafka's lived experience. According to Polgar, if "the disaster" is the truth outside literature, Blanchot's theory that the impossibility of writing defines a philosophy of writing is a thought lacking in equivalence.

Antoine J. POLGAR

Blanchot's Impossible Kafka

Maurice Blanchot formulates a theory of the impossibility of writing by directing our attention to Kafka's struggles with the demands of writing and life. His reference to the "impossible" seems to be a fatalistic expression of the writer's sadness facing the futility of the act of writing: "It is as if the possibility that my writing represents essentially exists to express its own impossibility — the impossibility of writing constitutes my sadness" (*The Work of Fire* 19-20). The concept of the impossibility of writing can refer to several things: to a condition that cannot exist, to the negation of the act, to writing as an ordeal, or all of the above. Blanchot notes that "the disaster" of Kafka's fragmented legacy "send(s) us back endlessly to the truth outside of literature." Then he warns against confusing this truth with the literature itself and attributes the oscillating interpretation between Kafka's life and stories to the writer's propensity to embed his "commentarial language" into a metafiction (2). Where does the antithesis between writing and its impossibility lead us? I claim that if "the disaster" is the truth outside literature, the theory that the impossibility of writing defines a philosophy of writing becomes a thought lacking in equivalence between writing and the disaster.

In the study at hand, I challenge Blanchot's claims about the impossibility of writing and discuss correspondences between Kafka's life and writing. I confine myself to Kafka's short stories because I have found traces of correspondence between the life and the texts yet unmentioned in scholarship about Kafka's texts. Blanchot raises the question of survival as a metaphor for writing and writing as a metaphor for survival. He refers to the survival of the writer, of literature, and of survival itself. He combines them in a meta-commentary on the writer's facticity and the contingency to which literary creation is consigned. His preoccupation with Kafka reflects an intense bio-critical interest — which the scholar is cautioned against and often ignores — in Kafka's lived experience. Today we seek to lessen our insecurity like those who set their watches in Prague by the firing of the Marienschanze gun and the raising of the flag of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at mid-day at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Grusa 9).

Blanchot approaches the question of this superior force tentatively. His notion of the enigmatic sacrifice in Kafka's writing leads him to shift focus away from writing (the original subject of his speculations) to futility like a doubting Abraham uncertain as to whether he had a son to sacrifice (*Work of Fire* 15). We grow old waiting for Blanchot to explain his uncertainty as we stand at the gate waiting for admittance to the Law. Then Blanchot shuts the gate in our faces (*Before the Law* 3-4; all short texts by Kafka are in *The Complete Stories*). Kafka's characters are conspicuous symbols of detritus, trying to fight their way through a throng with a message from an Emperor, an important dead man. The messenger will never get through (*An Imperial Message* 5). His characters are cockroaches thrown out by the charwoman so that the family can be saved (*Metamorphosis* 89); they are dedicated executioners impaled on their own torture machines (*In the Penal Colony* 140); the waking dead whose sayings nobody will read (*The Hunter Gracchus* 230). The predicaments in which Kafka's characters find themselves suggests that if one could understand the outcome of the stories, understanding would betray an enigma: "That is why we understand it only by betraying it" (*The Work of Fire* 11). Yet Blanchot's references to quotidian aspects of Kafka's life and his dialogical speculations on the survival of the writer and the text, subject the reader to an infinite indeterminacy. The "as if" is a figural metaphor of the desire to escape from facticity (*The Work of Fire* 19). But Kafka's life cannot be recovered where this hope is buried alive in the tomb of duration. Accounts of Kafka's life and work as if they could have been otherwise is the matter of Blanchot's fallacious paradox on the impossibility of writing.

As in the case of many of his contemporaries, Kafka's world and the lost Central European Jewish civilization he epitomized were obliterated, but moving textual, anecdotal, and documentary testimonies remain. This is why we cannot read his works with equanimity. His career as a writer, as a bureaucrat, his stage door dalliances, and courtships — some of which first came to us in the *Diaries* edited by Max Brod with initials to protect the living before Felice Bauer sold her letters — his relationship to his father, his friendships, his travels, his closeness to his sister Ottilia, his tuberculosis, and Milena's death have perhaps become cuneiform representations of the ineradicable sadness of

scholars distressed by what they perceive as the fragmented legacy of Kafka's works, diaries, and correspondence, and the concentration camp deaths of his sisters, Milena, and many of his relations. This strange fascination compels us to return to Prague.

We long to turn back all the clocks in Prague to imagine Kafka as a case history that ended well: "Had he lived, he would probably have gone to Zion, perfected a vernacular Hebrew, and given us the bewilderment of Kafkan parables and stories in the language of the J writer and of Judah Halevi" (Bloom 12). It is not the writing, but the reading that becomes an experience of regret. The imaginary analyst recounts that after a period of therapy, Hermann Kafka tells his son to quit studying law, supports him in his efforts to become a writer, and to forget about the asbestos factory. Kafka moves out of the parental home. After the stage door dalliance with the Yiddish actress, Mrs. Tschissik and affairs with Felice, Grete, and Milena (and others), he moves to another city. He marries Dora Dymant and never asks Dora to burn his old notebooks. He never throws pages of manuscripts into the fire in Berlin to keep warm during that cold winter. He becomes a socialist, migrates to Palestine where he is happily reunited with his friend Max Brod, works in a kibbutz, never follows a raw unpasteurized milk diet, and is cured of tuberculosis. On the eve of World War II, he travels incognito to Prague for the Jewish Agency and rescues his sisters and Milena and takes them to Palestine where he is also reunited with his old friend Jiri Langer, chronicler of the life of the Galician Hassidim. Neither his sisters nor Milena survived the Holocaust or died of natural causes (see Gazda <<http://www.zwoje-scrolls.com/zwoje43/text16p.htm>>). We dream of nothing else, but reconfiguring Kafka's past.

This transcendent aspect of Kafka's existence and work is at the same time concealed from us because of confusion between meta-fiction, Kafka's life and death, and the aftermath itself. Kafka prefigures this disjunction and it is manifest in Blanchot's antithetical reflections on the Hunter Gracchus: "We do not die, it is true, but because of that we do not live either; we are dead while we are alive, we are essentially survivors (*The Work of Fire* 8). Survival as a form of afterlife is Blanchot's perception of "the truth of books" — not Kafka's. As in the case of the Hunter Gracchus, the story of death and eternity that "nobody will read" (until we read it many years later) is the enchantment that enigmatically transforms the fiction into past, present and future reality before the reader's eyes. The dead man surviving in a fictitious netherworld is miraculously transformed into the reader's reality. We know that the Hunter Gracchus suggests the crow, "a name derivable from the Latin stem *gracc* which imitates the crawling and croaking of jackdaws, crows, and ravens," but this story might also be a figment of the author's reality as "the hunter who has lost life and yet missed death, as well as to the crows of the 'Reflections' which hover between earth and firmament" (Heller 82).

Elias Canetti cites this passage in one of Kafka's earliest letters to Milena Jesenà: "Several years ago I often used to go in a man-drowner [small boat] on the Moldau. I rowed upstream and then, stretched out on my back, floated downstream with the current, under the bridge. Because of my extreme thinness this may have looked very funny from the bridge. The clerk, having once seen me from the bridge like this and having sufficiently emphasized the humorous aspect, summarized his impressions as follows: It looked like a scene just before the Last Judgment, like the moment when the lids had already been lifted from the coffins, but the dead were still lying motionless (Jesenà qtd. in Canetti 25). The parallels between the floating coffins and the fate of the surviving corpse of the Hunter Gracchus transported by the boatman illustrate the correspondence between fiction and reality. Kafka embellishes the circumstances in a self-congratulatory moment to honor his character. In a triumph of authorial presence, Kafka arranges for his character to be met by the Burgomaster who "receives him in the name of the city." The Burgomaster welcomes him as an honored visitor. He kneels at his bier and prays. "A mishap" for which the boatman was held responsible consigns the Hunter Gracchus to "the forever" rather than to the "other world" (228). He was taken to the wrong destination. In the last line, the Hunter says his ship was "driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of death" (230). We do not know the nature of "the terrible fate" for which the boatman is responsible. Death itself is not depicted as a mishap, but as a death that did not turn out quite right. No death turns out as it should, even under the most ideal circumstances. The burial itself is often an ordeal for the dead and they cannot call upon anyone for help. Kafka consoles the reader and the Hunter Gracchus. You may be dead, but we are still going to give you the keys to the city.

Part of reading Kafka requires the faculty of altering the irreversible in one's mind. Hunting and dying were the Hunter's callings and the labors of the Hunter Gracchus were blessed. The disparity between text and life, hopes and dreams in Kafka's stories reveal the abyss between being and facticity, an ideal representation of the attribute of being unable to accept a grief that never ends, a grief so pervasive that it hopefully becomes the object of creation. Blanchot seizes on the following line to prove his proposition on the impossibility of writing. At the age of twenty-eight, Kafka wrote, "10 o'clock, 15 November, I will not let myself become tired. I'll jump into my story even though it should cut my face to pieces" (*Diaries* 28; *The Work of Fire* 15). Yet one has only to read the entry in the diary for the very next day to learn that Kafka had a change of mood. He writes of the euphoria he experienced in having confidence in abilities "of whose non-existence" he could convince himself "with complete certainty." He had recovered his self-confidence. A month later, Kafka is convinced of the opposite. He is made of stone, his every written word held hostage by doubt. His hopes were little more than "inscriptions on tombstones. Even words jar against each other. Consonants rub leadenly against each other and vowels sing an accompaniment like Negroes in a minstrel show" (*Diaries* 29).

Kafka considers himself "a dead bride," the personification of the innocent promise of love unfulfilled. He believes his infirmities are caused by his education and targets "a multitude of people" for reproach as well as the reproach itself for criticism (*Diaries* 15). He rehearses the paragraph three times in his diary until the reproach grows into an expectation of justice that became futile in its evanescence: "And how expect it to be of any use to throw up to people in such a condition the mistakes they once made in earlier times in educating a boy who is as incomprehensible to them now as they to us ... It was useless to complain because those responsible take the conviction of the venerability of the dead together with them into the beyond and uphold it ten times as much from there" (*Diaries* 17). Then his reproach is transformed into an expression of resignation. He concludes with a paragraph in which he combines the assurance in the present (that he could prove his point) with the subjunctive expression of the hypothetical to describe an act which he alleges. Kafka demonstrates here a gift for prolepsis which represents the historicity of past victimization "to make another person out of me than the one I became" and shifting to the present tense combines it with future intentions for which he reproaches his elders: "I can prove at any time that my education tried to make another person out of me than the one I became. It is for the harm, therefore, that my educators could have done me in accordance with their intentions that I reproach them; I demand from their hands the person I now am, and since they cannot give him to me, I make of my reproach and laughter a drumbeat sounding into the world beyond...the reproach for having spoiled a good, beautiful part (in my dreams sometimes it appears to me the way a dead bride appears to others)." (*Diaries* 18)

Prolepsis confers a new dimension on time. Next, Kafka contradicts himself and predicts he could prove what could have been done in keeping with what he now anticipated to be the intentions (always the best intentions) of his elders for which he reproaches them in the now. He is now their victim and ever would be because history forbade that they restore the person he is now. In other words, although you had the best of intentions in murdering the good in me which yet exists, I am now and was always already dead from birth. So there is nothing you can do to make amends. There is sadness here but there is also a sublime resilience. The innocence in us is always murdered in advance by the sins of our elders.

I re-examine Blanchot's observation that such expressions reflect an antithetical connection between the impossibility of writing and the writer's sadness: "The more luck I have, that is to say, the more gifted I am in making my unhappiness felt by description, embellishments, and images, the more the bad luck this misfortune reports is respected. It is as if the possibility that my writing represents essentially exists to express its own impossibility — the impossibility of writing that constitutes my sadness" (*The Work of Fire* 20). However, Kafka's metamorphic (not metaphoric) insights and his command of language are so self-annihilating that his writing reshapes this correspondence as "a genuine determination of existence." In Kafka's writings, there is "a mysterious feeling of strangeness which creates the impression that everything in it actually points beyond itself to something new ... interpretation seems a genuine determination of existence rather than an activity or an intention" (Gadamer 71). This "something new" is the unrevealed and indecipherable else-ness of being, the sensibility of incongruous reality which has been described as "Lived Rhetoric" (Koelb

208). According to an early diary entry, Kafka is visiting his grandparents and writes a little ostentatiously a page of fiction in front of the assembled family. An uncle tears the page away from him, glances at it and pronounces judgment before others: "The usual stuff" (*Diaries* 209). As a result, "with one thrust I had in fact been banished [*vertrieben*] from society, the judgment [*Urteil*] repeated itself within in me ... and even within the feeling of belonging to a family I got an insight into the cold space of our world which I had to warm with a fire that first I wanted to seek out (*Diaries* 43-44).

Kafka's reaction to the incident becomes a figure on the judgment of banishment and on the inseparability of a person and language, which might have served as the inspirational wellspring for *The Stoker* (*The Sons* 17-50) and *Amerika*. Kafka is left with a futile hope for freedom in a losing battle for deliverance with the "injustice of providence." A willing and unwilling captive, Kafka heroically dwells on the irony of the predicament of his past and future: "I weigh my past against my future, but find both of them admirable, cannot give either the preference, and find nothing to grumble at save the injustice of providence that has so clearly favored me ("The Way Home" 387). In the midst of this battle, he experiences the suicidal sense of vertigo of the hero about to die fighting. Kafka's prophetic stories are both premonitory and consolatory in relation to aftermaths. The little girl's face brightens after she is eclipsed by the shadow of the man overtaking her after the man had passed by ("Absent-minded Window-gazing" 387). The fearful crime is not happening to the little girl and her face brightens after the shadow of terror has passed. This double absence of an occurrence, the meaning of which eludes us and to which we must respond with equanimity, raises the question of Jewish sources. Although Blanchot does not ignore the hermeneutics of Jewish sources in Kafka's writings, this dimension seems to dispel Blanchot's notion of the disaster of writing.

In the mystical theology of Hasidic thought, the representation of the manifest, concrete, and palpable disaster to which Blanchot refers constitutes at least one of the essences of Hasidic thought. It is the paradoxical experience of transcendence "as the absence of the divine presence in existence" (Elior 94). Kafka's trials may have been a reflection of the duality of the Habad-Hasidic worldview in which existence consists of nothingness (*ayin*) and existence (*yesh*) (see Elior 13). The foundation of all unity is this duality unifying two opposites and defined by irrationality (see Elior 97). In its tendency to value divine worship in the mundane and the secular, Hasidism is affirmed by means of "equanimity" (*histavut*), "nullification of being," "devotion," "stripping away corporeality," "self-annihilation" (see Elior 16). According to Frantisek Langer, brother of Jiri Langer, the Jewish youth from Prague who left home to live among the Hassidim of Eastern Galicia, and author of *Die Erotik der Kabbala*, "During the war he had made friends with Franz Kafka, and the two men used to go for walks together in Prague. Kafka evidently found Jiri a kindred spirit; his diary contains several Chassidic myths and legends which he had heard from Jiri" (xxiii). According to the *Dairies*, Kafka and Brod accompanied Langer to visit the Wonder-Rabbi, a relative of the Zaddik of Belz on 14 September 1915 (*Diary* 341) and on 6 October 1915 Kafka reflects on his familiarity with Langer's writings about Hassidim (*Diaries* 348; see also Mailloux 362-64). Speaking of which, Kafka considered himself "dead from birth," the victim of a mythical paternal infanticide. Writing was Kafka's life. Yet it was a life was forbidden by his father's life, to which he testified in a late indictment against his father. After reciting the extent to which he was physically overwhelmed and intimidated by his father, Kafka claims "for me you took on the enigmatic quality that all tyrants have whose rights are based on their person and not on reason. At least so it seemed to me" (*Letter to His Father* 122).

The son accuses the father of inflicting "shame and suffering" on him. The father is the vulture hacking at his feet. When a rescuer gets his gun to rid him of the vulture, the vulture "thrusts its beak through his mouth" to prevent Kafka from speaking but drowns irretrievably in Kafka's blood ("The Vulture" 442-43). Kafka grows silent and become unable to think or speak in his father's presence (*Letter to His Father* 126). Yet Kafka knew his father's world was a world at which his characters looked through many windows in unremitting expectation of deliverance. We attempt to subvert the world of the parent but remain in it of our own volition out of a sense of loyalty to their uncertainty.

A Czech Jewish peddler transplanted from the countryside, Kafka's father was prey to the insecurity of Prague's Jewish minority (a ghetto squeezed between the German minority and resentful colonized Czechs within a colony of the Austro-Hungarian empire). Although Kafka's cultivation and law degree freed him of his father's sense of inferiority, Kafka was heir to his father's insecurity and he alternately resented and embraced it. Kafka portrayed himself in a letter to Milena as a person with

a thirty-eight year journey behind him and parenthetically added that since he was a Jew, his journey would be "even much longer" (*Letters* 47). However, when Milena made reference to the stereotype of Jewish anxiety, Kafka replied laconically that "such a general reproach shows more theoretical than practical knowledge of human nature" and that it applies to only "isolated cases" such as himself. Then, before straying from the topic, he generalized that "The insecure position of Jews, insecure within themselves, insecure among people, would make it above all comprehensible that they consider themselves to be allowed to own only what they hold in their hands or between their teeth, that furthermore only palpable possessions give them the right to live, and that they will never again acquire what they once have lost but that instead it calmly swims away from them forever. From the most improbable sides Jews are threatened with danger, or let us, to be more exact, leave the dangers aside and say they are threatened with threats" (*Letters* 50-51). He remembers the family's itinerary from the worst street in the ghetto to affluence, his father's rantings, on how at the age of seven he had to push a handcart from village to village, and the house next door with its backroom brothel. For the father, Kafka was a parasite, a cockroach. The father believed his son was so lacking in manhood that in the mother's presence, the father offered to help him find the nearest brothel when he wanted to get married and start his own family (*Letter to His Father* 158).

Kafka's *Letter to His Father* is a metaphorical reverse sacrifice of the son's future. Oedipus and Abraham intersect. Laius and Abraham are called upon to sacrifice their sons by virtue of having a son in the world where time threatens. The birth of the son, a gesture of faith in the future, is a constant reminder of the death of the father and the death of the son. Although having a son is supposed to be a blessing, the future predicted by the oracle or the Divinity is the risk of death. The son is consigned to death by life itself in the secret of time's "unreachable" and "unreadable" anteriority (Robbins 92). Yet another dimension of the impossibility of writing is silence and secrecy. Cannetti reminds us that Kafka was advised not to speak in the last weeks of his life. By then, he could only speak in a whisper. He could not swallow anything without experiencing excruciating pain. The reality thus encounters the fiction of secrecy and we think we betray Kafka by understanding the fiction in posthumous empathy because the reality was too painful to reveal. But Kafka had no difficulty revealing by parables which verge on the literal. Despite his anguished relationship with his father, Kafka longed to belong. In *Home-Coming*, Kafka returns in a dream to his father's old yard. The setting, materializing out of the past, seems abandoned. The past is lost in the time of an always already retrospective agony of the anachronistic. The revenant asks, "Who is going to receive me?" To be unwelcome would have been unbearable. The farmer's prodigal son keeps his distance so that he might not be taken by surprise as an eavesdropper or interloper. The stranger spies on the intimacy of an absent family to which he was not sure he belongs, apprehensive at the possibility of being found out. The striking clock from childhood days tolls the memory of the lost childhood he thinks he hears in recognition of the elusiveness of ephemera being summoned back. In his estrangement, he thinks that if someone were to open the door to him now and ask him a question (such as where have you been all these years?) would he not be the one who would behave secretly? This remove is the estrangement in the present one keeps within like a secret lest one's return be too painful an intrusion on the parents from whom one is estranged by the gift of sentience (*Home-Coming* 445-446).

The self in this story finds itself in the vestigial world of the past in the interstice between nothingness and the quest for belonging. One is unsure of the welcome one is going to receive. Is anyone is at home" Has one arrived too late? Hesitancy overwhelms the subject to such an extent that he dares not knock on the door to announce his presence. He is afraid to ask a question because the question calls the questioner's existence. Maybe it is preferable to let sleeping dogs lie. But he presses his claim as a matter of justice. He reminds us that he belongs in this house. "I am the son of my father, the old farmer" (445). If the door were opened, if there was a possibility of a homecoming to the house of being, Kafka's asks himself whether he would behave with reticence, "like one who wants to keep his secret?" (*Home-Coming* 446).

Blanchot intuits that Kafka's forays into the liminal reaches of solitude and language bring him into the mysterious and secretive place of a potential Kabbala (*The Work of Fire* 18). Harold Bloom adopted as his working principle the observation that "he did everything possible to evade interpretation, which only means that what most needs and demands interpretation in Kafka's writing is its perversely deliberate evasion of interpretation" (4). Although Bloom believes Kafka's "evasion"

was purposive, he oversimplifies Kafka's evasiveness in his perception of "Kafka's negative," or Kafka's often quoted reference to the hopelessness of the human condition in the reported conversation with Max Brod. Bloom traces Kafka's negative to Gnosticism, Freud and his Judaism of the Negative, "of the future as it is always rushing towards us," as if Kafka's visions are too dangerous impart openly (12). In the final section of his commentary, in an attempt to interpret Kafka's evasiveness "even in the realm of his own Negative," Bloom shifts to Kafka's parable of the Law set forth in "The Problem of our Laws." Bloom assumes the reader knows the meaning of the Law in Judaism so he does not explain it. When Kafka writes of the man from the country seeking admittance to the law, he is trying to teach what man ought to think and the means by which man's life becomes noble by parable, secrecy and silence. Kafka wrote and kept silent but up until the end he had long since defied silence. Wilhelm Stekel whom Kafka had read writes of a woman patient who had been treated by another analyst for homosexuality and who came to see Stekel for treatment of compulsions she had kept secret from her previous analyst. One of her compulsions was to write entire sentences from poems with her tongue on her palate "on a spot where no one could read them...she wrote these sentences in shorthand, i.e. in a secret code." The patient also dreamt of a grave with a big tombstone on it to symbolize her secret. She said "I shall keep as silent as a grave" (469-70). Stekel relates this case history to cast doubt on Freud's report of a compulsive patient's disclosure of a secret after three years of intensive analysis. Stekel believed the compulsive patient would seize on the gullible analyst's wrong interpretation out of a fear of confessing the true secret" The secret may express itself in the symptom, i.e., it may symbolize itself as a secret in the symptom because the patient has a need to express it symbolically. This enables the analyst to come close to the secret at the critical moment" (Stekel 468-69).

Kafka too expresses his secrets symbolically as lived rhetoric. The trajectory of the transformation is not a mystery. In *A Dream* Josef K. found himself in a cemetery on a beautiful day looking at a fresh grave mound (401). The sight of the mound exerted an attraction upon him from a distance. He wanted to be near it. He approached it with difficulty because banners obscured the view. A celebration was in progress. Two men held up a gravestone in the air in defiance of the law of gravity, A third man, whom K recognized as an artist, drew golden letters in the air with a pencil. The recognition of his name on the epitaph signals Kafka's interment and emancipation to come. He associates death with the end of writing and reading and discreetly taking secrets with him he felt should not survive him. Once he realizes his name is on the tombstone, he obligingly buries himself in "the literal enactment of an abstraction, the embodiment in a concrete image of an idea" (Greenberg 68). The abstraction is the dream of death and the embodiment of the concrete image is death's imminence, the return from the nothingness of being to nothingness itself and the last minute realization that if you have not atoned for your mistakes: "It is too late to apologize now." The last line referring to the awakening is necessary as a literal representation of death as an awakening from the nothingness of being (*A Dream* 401). The dream is an epitaph because death is implicit in the dream-narrative in which the narrator was "always already" dead before he awakens from the dream (Bloom 68). The celebration propitiates Kafka's emancipation from life from which only death would release him.

Yet another dimension to this story is reality. It might have been occasioned by a 1920 pilgrimage to a cemetery where Milena spent earlier sorrowful nights at the age of thirteen following her mother's death. A brother who died when Milena was three was also buried there (Mailloux 445). The lover visits Milena's sorrows and mourns their doomed relationship. In a last intimate gesture, he shares her mourning for her little brother and mourns his dead brothers by depositing flowers: "Yesterday I found the grave ... I didn't realize it was the grave of your maternal relatives, nor can one read the inscriptions — the gold has almost entirely peeled off — except by bending down attentively. I spent a long time there, the grave is beautiful, so indestructible ... Jenicek, was this your little brother? ... I laid a few multi-colored carnations right on the edge of the edge. I felt better in the cemetery than in town; the feeling lasted, too; for a long time I walked through the town as though through a cemetery" (*Letters* 115).

Kafka is already a phantom in the world of the living, the trapeze artist who lived aloft night and day and found the interregnum between performances irritating and cried when he could not work from two trapezes (*First Sorrow* 446). Unless he had two trapeze bars, how could he go on living? Yet

Kafka maintained his equilibrium between two worlds, the world of the father and the Czech-German world of Prague's intelligentsia, between two languages, two nationalities, two talents, two loyalties and two women. He graphically depicts the perennality of twos in the drawing sent to Milena, of "the 'delinquent' drawn and quartered between two poles and torn apart in the middle and the inventor giving himself airs as though the whole thing were his original invention, whereas he has only copied the butcher who stretches the disemboweled pig in his shop-front" (*Letters* 204-5).

Scholars noted this aspect of Kafka's genius — beginning with Bernard Groethuysen (a student of Dilthey) suggesting that Kafka was the self-deprecating author of his own duality. This twoness encompassed states of dream and waking and keeping his eyes open while he slept. As Groethuysen points out in his 1933 preface to the first French edition of *Der Process*, "There are adventurers who took the risk of leaving (this world), and who approached worlds that were not prepared to welcome them. Most of them became lost there and had to seek refuge in the asylums that the inhabitants of this earth reserve for those who expatriate themselves. And yet there were those, among the most rare, it is true, whom in the course of their voyage, preserved a perfectly lucid mind. They stayed awake during their slumber; they keep their eyes open while they slept" (Groethuysen 9-10; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). In another letter to Milena, Kafka refers to "A 'Tribuna' reader [who told him] recently he thought I must have made extensive studies in a lunatic asylum. 'Only in my own,' I said, whereupon he continued trying to pay me compliments on 'my own' lunatic asylum" (*Letters* 149). Did Blanchot believe that Kafka's writing and life explained little or nothing about literature because there was nothing to explain other than the inexplicable? Or did Blanchot feel compelled to theorize on the hope that one could rescue the writer and his work posthumously from the many nothingnesses he left behind in the eddies of the drowning man's bark, from the nothingness of the lost work, the nothingness of the report of the father turning away from his grave when Dora Dymant throws herself upon it. Kafka was an initiate to this Nothingness as a witness of the concealment of the boundless nothingness from all creatures above and below. He knew nothing about it other than that it exists": "Therefore its name is 'I am becoming'" (Matt 197). He names it in his writings as the first step in becoming. Its written existence as logos is thus cause of Being and Being is the effect of nothingness. "The effect is in the cause after the mode of the cause, and the cause is in the effect after the mode of the effect" (Matt 198).

There is also in Kafka's writing the immemorial legacy of the nothingness of Kafka's unbearable unhappiness alone in the cavity of his room/self where he hears his inaudible scream and then hears it cease, a door opens in the wall and the ghostly apparition of a girl-child emerges. Kafka asks "Am I the person you want to find?" The child seeks to comfort him. Kafka seeks her reassurance. He wants to know if her visit is a case of mistaken identity. Although he is "needful," he dares not hope that his prayer for intimacy can be answered out of nothingness by a chaste, innocent and immaterial apparition. In the course of the conversation with the little girl, it is evident that Kafka is talking to himself: "No stranger could come any nearer to you than I am already by nature," the child says (*Unhappiness* 393). Then Kafka leaves his room, tripping over the leg of a chair. But there is no evidence in the text that the apparition took her leave. He does not forget about her and she is still present in him.

Kafka's language in this story (and in many others) reveals that he is already thinking about his final place of rest "to enlarge the final peace of the graveyard and let nothing survive save that ... characteristic movement in such a condition is to run your little finger along your eyebrows" (*Resolutions* 398). The profession of interest in the peace of death and withdrawing from society that prompts Kafka to transform himself into one as dead is coupled with the idiosyncratic movement of running his little finger along his eyebrows. Is existence a fleeting gesture in the cosmological scheme? It has the integrity of physical movement in the temporal world. Only a living person can do it. One is both oblivious and aware of it at the same time insofar as if it were called to one's attention, one would acknowledge the gesture. But it is not something one could fail or succeed at. It is even something one could do absentmindedly in recognition of having lived. He is among us still, the Great Hunter Gracchus, blaming the boatman for the mishap of his wandering death, predicting to the attentive Burgomaster of Riga, "Nobody will read what I say here." Blanchot believed Kafka's life and art undermined his writing. I argue here that Kafka entered into a secret pact with himself at the long onset of his death in obedience to an inexorable entelechy of sacrifice and loss.

His stories often end in loss, but it is a loss which he attempts to spare the reader as the sister does in *The Knock at the Manor Gate* (418). The narrator and his sister are passing by a manor gate on a hot summer day. An opening leading the way to a house where people live sufficient to themselves in relation to people outside passing by who would like to have such a life. The narrator cannot tell now whether she knocked on the gate out of mischief or out of absence of mind or merely threatened it with her fist and did not knock at all. We are struck first with the uncertainty of the gesture, whether the sister knocked at all, her motive, and the possibility of a futile gesture of anger in threatening the gate with her fist in a moment of frustration over the dream of impossible intimacy with her brother. They are going to be punished for their impunity for just passing by and the fleeting moment they coveted intimacy. The temerity of even hoping is annulled at the moment it is thought of because there is no hope of getting in. The narrator asks the question the hopeless ask of themselves. Is it wrong to dare to entertain hope? Am I going to suffer for it? Would it have been better not to hope? Are they going to be charged for the crime of hoping because the situation was hopeless? They could not help it. He is about to be charged. The horsemen come to arrest him. His only thought is for his sister's safety. At first, she refuses to leave him. At last she leaves at the narrator's urging after assuring her she can return to be with him. When the horsemen inquire about his sister, he repeats the lie he told his sister to get her to save herself, "She wasn't here at the moment, was the apprehensive reply, but she would come later" (*The Knock* 418). With this secret epiphany of the sister's return that will not take place, the reader is deliberately led to anticipate a way out of the impasse.

Kafka does not want to lie to the horsemen, but were he to tell the truth about saving her from arrest, he must betray a sense of hopelessness to the reader. I do not believe Kafka wrote of hopelessness with impunity. The mouse is counseled by the cat to change direction before he eats it (*A Little Fable* 445). The gentleman offers to shoot the vulture to rescue him, but before he can go home to get his gun, the vulture flies down his throat. A stranger usurps the helmsman's place. When he calls for help, the crew has eyes only for the stranger. The key elements in these stories are "change direction," "rescue," "calling for help." We are on trial without a defense for being. We cannot justify our presence for "standing on this platform, holding on to this strap, letting myself be carried along by this tram" for surrendering one's will. But who asked you to put up a defense? But that is irrelevant ("On the Tram" 388). You still need to justify your claim. Then he sees a girl ready to alight from the moving tram and the vision of beauty justifies itself. Like the prophet Moses, Kafka was "a dreamer of dreams" (Fox xiii, 4). He would get a glimpse of the promised land of Canaan (Fox xxxii, 49), but would "not cross over this Jordan" (Deuteronomy xxxi, 2). We cannot conclude from Kafka's dreams or death in battle that the survival of literature is at stake. Although "no man has knowledge of the site of his burial-place until this day" (Deuteronomy 34:6) we know where Kafka is buried.

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Author's profile: Antoine J. Polgar teaches world literatures at Southern New Hampshire University and French language and literature at Empire State College. His areas of interest include French intellectual history, hermeneutics, postcolonial theory, and Francophone and Anglophone postcolonial literatures. His published articles in the *Journal of Colonialism* (2001), *Colonial History* (2001), *Theory@Buffalo* (1999, 2001), and *Les Cahiers du Celat* (2002). E-mail: <a.polgar@snhu.edu>