LABYRINTH Vol. 26, No. 2, Winter 2024

WALTER BENJAMIN AND GÜNTHER ANDERS ON KAFKA AND THE POLITICAL ROLE OF LITERATURE

Bat Chen Seri (Lund)

Abstract

What is the political significance of literature? How, if at all, can fictional narratives interact with issues of social and legal justice? This paper addresses these questions and proposes four models of literature's intervention in political reality based on Walter Benjamin's and Günther Anders' readings of Kafka. According to Benjamin's 1930s Kafka essays, fictional narratives have the power to unsettle hitherto established legal decisions and thus partake in the exercise of justice. Anders, in his 1951 book Kafka: Pro und Contra, *criticises Kafka for authoring narratives that—complacent with existing power—lend themselves to being used to morally absolve acts of oppression. Taken together, the four models—two of which are based on Benjamin's Kafka reading and two on Anders'—offer a complex view of the role of literature as a political actor, recognising its positive value while warning against its potential abuse.*

Keywords: Franz Kafka; Walter Benjamin; Günther Anders; literature; political justice.

Introduction

In 1934, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin published his major study of Kafka in the Jewish weekly newspaper *Jüdische Rundschau*. Earlier in the same year, Günther Anders gave a lecture on Kafka at the Parisian *Institut d'Études Germaniques*. The Kafka lecture developed into a text published in 1951 as a small book titled *Kafka, Pro und Contra*, and later as a chapter in Anders' 1984 book *Mensch ohne Welt*. In the introduction to his later book, Anders—a student of Heidegger and Husserl, Hannah Arendt's first husband and Walter Benjamin's cousin—mentions the latter two as the only people in the audience of his 1934 Kafka lecture who were familiar with Kafka at the time (Anders 2022, xxxiv).

Anders' thought, largely forgotten for several decades, has lately been gaining a moderate revival, which applies in particular to his ideas of the posthuman and critique of technology. Anders' Kafka book, however, is still much overlooked. Two

notable exceptions, discussed in this paper, are Kata Gellen's "Kafka, Pro and Contra: Günther Anders's Holocaust Book," which focuses on Anders' moral critique of Kafka, and Jean-Michel Rabaté's "Laughing with Kafka after Promethean Shame," which inverts Anders' critique, reading Kafka through the prism of Anders' notion of Promethean shame.

The figure of Kafka was central for both Benjamin and Anders throughout their literary careers. Each of the two cousins repeatedly returned to Kafka to reflect on major themes in their thought. Among the themes shared by the two, I will focus on the role of literature as an actor in legal, political and social spheres. This paper proposes four models of literature's intervention in political reality. First, I follow Vivian Liska's analysis of Benjamin's Kafka essays to propose a model of delimitation and deferral based on the rabbinic dynamics of *halakhah* and *haggadah*. Second, I draw on Brendan Moran's reading of Benjamin's Kafka essays to suggest a model of disruption, where literature emerges as a redemptive force from a primal realm of possibilities. Next, with the help of Kata Gellen's analysis, I present Anders' model of compliance, where literature can be misused as oppressors' moral defence. Lastly, I follow Jean-Michel Rabaté's reading of Kafka's literature as a political critique through derision. Taken together, the four models offer a complex view of the role of literature as a political actor, recognising its positive value while pointing out its potential abuse.

Walter Benjamin: Kafka's Mighty Paw

Benjamin's 1934 Kafka essay is the most extensive text among his three essays and numerous notes and fragments on the topic of Kafka. Opening with an enigmatic story narrating an event from Potemkin's courtyard, the essay playfully shifts between mentions of Kafka's work, references to other modern literary classics, legends it frames as 'Hasidic' or 'Talmudic', and German folk songs. The densely packed text confronts the reader with the problem of literature rather than formulating it for the sake of discussion. When the question of literature is finally addressed, it is done from a surprisingly Jewish point of view.[1] In each of his three essays—the major 1934 essay (Benjamin 2005, 794-818), the 1931 radio essay (Benjamin

[1] This could be explained, at least partially, by the nature of the journal in which the 1934 essay was published. As Scholem—who pulled the strings for the essay to be published in the *Jüdische Rundschau*—told Benjamin, according to the censor's requirement, articles in the journal had to include explicit references to Jewish themes. (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 105-6.)

2005, 494-500), and the 1938 letter essay (Benjamin 1994, 560-66)—Benjamin characterises Kafka's works using the two rabbinic categories *halakhah* and *haggadah*, i.e.,. the legislative and the narrative parts of the rabbinic text, respectively. In the 1938 letter essay sent to his friend Gershom Scholem, he writes:

> Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its haggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But that is their misery and their beauty, that they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine [*Lehre*], as haggadah lies at the feet of halakhah. When they have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it. (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 225)

Several points in this quote call for clarification: the idea of sacrificing truth for the sake of transmissibility, the reference to *haggadah* and *halakhah*, and the striking image of the mighty paw. In what follows, I will present two readings of Benjamin's Kafka texts which correspond to two different interpretations of the mighty paw image. The next section follows Vivian Liska's interpretation of the mighty paw image, which reads it alongside the halakhah-haggadah duo. The subsequent section presents Brendan Moran's interpretation of the image, which draws on the truth-transmissibility binary.

Literature as Delimitation and Deferral

In her article, "Law and Sacrifice in Kafka and His Readers," Vivian Liska addresses interpretations of the law in Kafka's work, focusing on and contrasting two thinkers: Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin. In Agamben's reading of Kafka, inspired by stories such as the well-known parable *Before the Law* and the gruesome short story *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka promotes the annihilation of the law through the destruction of its mechanisms. Thus, according to Agamben, the countryman who stands before the law strategically exhausts the doorkeeper until law's enforcement is interrupted as its door is being shut, and the execution machine in the penal colony destroys itself when inserted with the instruction "be just" (Liska 2022, 260-61).

Against Agamben's antinomian reading—and, interestingly, against Scholem's antinomian tendencies as well—Liska posits Benjamin's reading which attributes to Kafka a more nuanced treatment of the law. She distinguishes two different systems of law in Benjamin's thought: the pre-historical lawlessness of a

swamp-like *Vorwelt* (which, according to Liska, Benjamin identifies with the legal order of his time), and the Jewish rabbinic legal system. The two legal systems are not to be identified but opposed: Benjamin writes that the halakhic purity and dietary rules are measures against this swamp world, of which nothing remains but these very attempts to overcome it (Liska 2022, 263).

Benjamin's Kafka readings owe much to the extended exchange between Benjamin and Scholem on the topic of Kafka's work. (As mentioned above, one of Benjamin's three Kafka essays was written as part of this exchange.) While many of Scholem's ideas permeated Benjamin's essays, on some points it was their disagreement which encouraged Benjamin to sharpen his views. One such central point of dispute concerns the meaning of law in Kafka's work. Where Scholem saw Kafka as a modern-day Kabbalist, imbuing Kafka's law with a theological dimension, Benjamin connected the law in Kafka to the human aspects of Jewish law, which he took to be a defence against the swamp-like existence in Kafka's world (Liska 2022, 264-65). In Liska's reading, the rabbinic worldview offers a model for a healthy relationship between literature (representing lived experience) and law, where neither the latter oppresses the former nor the former destroys the latter. The mighty paw raised by Kafka's writings against the *Lehre* is contrasted in Benjamin's remark to the submissive haggadah, which "modestly lie[s] at the feet" (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 225) of the halakhah. Liska mentions Scholem's objection to this characterisation of the haggadah, where he states that the antinomian character does not distinguish Kafka's work from the haggadah but is also a feature of the haggadah itself. While she agrees with Scholem's objection to Benjamin's depiction of the haggadah as submissive, Liska rejects Scholem's characterisation of both the haggadah and Kafka's writings as antinomian (Liska 2022, 267). Against Benjamin's statement, Liska draws on Scholem's idea of the affinity between Kafka's works and the haggadah and uses it to overturn Scholem's remark: showing that the haggadah is not antinomian, she derives that neither is Kafka's work.

To characterise the relationship between halakhah and haggadah, Liska turns to Moshe Halbertal's article "At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud." There, Halbertal presents three talmudic paradigms for the relationship between law and narrative: first, the narrative provides an explanatory basis for the law; second, the narrative provides practical instruction regarding the law's implementation; and third, the narrative subverts the law by pointing out

its limited nature (Halbertal 2011, 34). It is the third paradigm, in focus in Halbertal's article, which provides a model for Liska's understanding of Benjamin's mighty paw image. Halbertal focuses on the legal issue of forgiveness—the Jewish rules regulating the obligation of an injurer to appease the injured, and the requirement for the injured to forgive. The Talmud, however, is aware of the complexity of the issue and the problems arising from the very attempt to legalise such a delicate matter as forgiveness. This awareness is expressed in a series of stories inserted into the talmudic text which, as Halbertal shows, artfully convey the limits of the legal text in which they are embedded. One of the stories Halbertal discusses is the following:

> A certain butcher injured Rav, and he did not come before him [to seek forgiveness]. On the day before Yom Kippur, [Rav] said, "I will go and appease him." R. Huna met him. He asked, "Where is my master going?" He said, "To appease so-and-so." [R. Huna] said [to himself] "Abba [i.e.,. Rav] is going to kill a man!" Rav went and stood over him. The butcher was seated, cleaning the head [of an animal]. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rav]. He said to him, "Abba, go; I have nothing to do with you." While he was still cleaning the animal's head, a bone shot out, struck the butcher's neck, and killed him. (Halbertal 2011, 33)

This story takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, when it is believed that every Jew is judged according to his or her sins and good deeds, to determine whether he or she will live or die in the following year. Since the only way to expiate the sin of injury caused by the butcher is for him to attain Rav's forgiveness, Rav's act initially appears to be an act of humility and generosity. Nevertheless, Halbertal contends, the story's ending, as foreshadowed by R. Huna's remark, reveals the deadly nature of Rav's act. There is a threshold to be crossed between the injurer and the injured, and this crossing could be an act of goodwill as much as an act of aggression. The story, says Halbertal, forcefully confronts us with the thin line separating good from ill-intention and therefore marks the area where law's hand falls short, where the text cannot offer any further corrections to the legal scheme and solve the problems it anticipates (Halbertal 2011, 33-34). The threshold that needs to be crossed in this specific case of forgiveness symbolises a general threshold between intention and deed, which cannot be regulated by the halakhic law; it further symbolises another threshold, therefore, one that cannot be crossed: between law and life, represented by the narrative.

Beyond Halbertal's brilliant analysis, the story contains an image that is at least as striking as Benjamin's "mighty paw." The refusing butcher did not die, as we might have expected, following his condemnation in Yom Kippur, but on the

spot, struck by a dead animal's bone. The butcher's creaturely and miraculous death calls our attention to the horror of the halakhic order, to the inherent violence of any legal system, including the Jewish one. And yet this horror does not bring about the abolition of halakhic law. In the rabbinic dialectic of halakhah and haggadah, neither excludes the other. Both the narrative and the legal scheme live in the talmudic text side by side. The narrative, by its very presence in the text, subverts the idea of a self-sufficient, all-pervasive law. The role of the story, the role of the haggadah in this case, is to mark the limits of the halakhah without destroying it altogether.

Drawing on this relationship, Liska maintains that for Benjamin, Kafka's stories with their mighty paw limit the law, keeping it within its proper boundaries. The mighty paw raised by Kafka's stories, according to Liska, does not crush down the law. In other words, Benjamin's Kafka is not an antinomian Kafka (Liska 2022, 267-69). How precisely does Kafka's literature subvert the law without destroying it? One such model, Liska points out, is found in Benjamin's notion of deferral:

> Like the haggadic parts of the Talmud, [Kafka's] books, too, are stories; they are a haggadah that constantly pauses, luxuriating in the most detailed descriptions, in the simultaneous hope and fear that it might encounter the halakhic order, the doctrine itself, en route. (Benjamin 2005, 496)

Elsewhere Benjamin writes more explicitly:

> In the stories which Kafka left us, narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: its ability to postpone the future. In *Der Prozeß*, postponement is the hope of the accused man only if the proceedings do not gradually turn into the judgment. (Benjamin 2005, 807)

It only requires a slight shift, writes Liska, to apply this notion of deferral to the lifelong waiting of the countryman who stands before the law (Liska 2022, 268). Assigning to literature the role of delimitation and deferral, Liska's reading of Benjamin and Kafka portrays literature as a positive and powerful actor within legal and political reality. Between the lines, however, one might sense an implicit critique of the logic of deferral, such as when Liska invokes Scholem (through Agamben) on the powerlessness inherent in the Jewish tradition of waiting in hope (Liska 2022, 260).

Literature as Disruption

In Liska's reading, the mighty paw represents the narrative that stops the law from overstepping its boundaries, perhaps even preventing the law from ever arriving.

Brendan Moran, in his article "Literature as Miscreant Justice: Benjamin and Scholem Debate Kafka's Law," offers another interpretation of the mighty paw image, and hence of literature's role. Similar to Liska, Moran turns to the dispute between Benjamin and Scholem on the law in Kafka to introduce the outline of his argument. For Scholem, Kafka's work contains "the *moral world of halakhah* […] complete with its abysses and its dialectics" (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 127). Moran, however, spotlights Kafka's affinity with the *Vorwelt*, precisely where Scholem thinks Benjamin goes too far with viewing the law "only from its most *profane* side" (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 127).

In his 1934 essay, Benjamin compares Kafka's world to the swamp-like *Vorwelt*:

> Kafka did not consider the age in which he lived as an advance over the beginnings of time. His novels are set in a swamp world. (Benjamin 2005, 808)

What characterises this swamp world is its dream-like melting of one thing into another, where creatures are in a perpetual state of becoming, where "[n]one has a firm place in the world, or firm, inalienable outlines… none that is not trading qualities with its enemy or neighbour, none that has not completed its period of time and yet is unripe" (Benjamin 2005, 799); in short, none that does not have "the form which things assume in oblivion" (Benjamin 2005, 811). In a preparatory note for his 1931 radio talk, Benjamin already expresses the idea that Kafka's novels take place in a primaeval swamp world; there, this swamp world is explicitly contrasted with the world of Jewish law (Benjamin 1981, 116). In line with this opposition, Moran reads the mighty paw raised by Kafka's stories as a creaturely existence emerging from the swamp-like *Vorwelt* and threatening the halakhic order (Moran 2020, 392). For Moran, the *Vorwelt* is not an oppressive form of existence but a primal realm of possibilities, and the halakhah is an attempt to determine a path against this lawless sphere. Kafka's stories, in contrast, are haggadah without halakhah; they express the absence of law and the absence of a path (Moran 2020, 396).

Let us recall the passage from Benjamin's 1938 letter essay where he refers to the mighty paw:

> Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to transmissibility, to its haggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But that is their misery and their beauty, that they had to become more than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of doctrine [*Lehre*], as haggadah lies at the feet of halakhah.

> When they have crouched down, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it. (Benjamin and Scholem 1989, 225)

While Liska interprets the mighty paw image in light of the halakhah-haggadah duo, Moran's analysis appears to draw on the opening statement of this quote. Kafka sacrificed truth, i.e.,., established conclusions, for the sake of transmissibility, i.e.,. perpetual study. In Moran's reading of Benjamin, the creation and study of literature involves an exercise of justice insofar as it subverts hitherto established knowledge and spotlights unacknowledged possibilities (Moran 2020, 397).

A similar idea is found in Benjamin's essay *On the Concept of History*. There, Benjamin goes against the logic of historicism which, on his account, is characterised by empathy with the victor (Benjamin 2006, 391). Instead, Benjamin recommends a revolutionary practice of fighting for the oppressed past (Benjamin 2006, 396). For Benjamin, however, the "oppressed" and the "victors" of the past mean something quite different from what we might expect. Benjamin does not call to rewrite history from a marginal point of view; his primary goal is not to fight for the sake of oppressed *people* or *groups*, but rather for the oppressed[2] *past* itself. This point could be clarified with the help of Werner Hamacher's remark that for Benjamin, "[t]ime – historical time – is nothing but the capability of the possible to find its satisfaction in an actual" (Hamacher 2005, 41). Along the lines of this reading, the "victors" of the past are the closed and concrete actualities of the past, which leave no room for unfulfilled possibilities and thus oppress the past as a sustainer of possibilities for the present. In this sense, history—and according to Moran, literature as well—is not the practice of exploiting excluded possibilities, but instead of presenting them as actualisable. The realm of possibilities is identified by Moran with Benjamin's swamp-like *Vorwelt*.

The "miscreant" in the title of Moran's article is taken from elsewhere in Benjamin's writings: in *Toward the Critique of Violence*, Benjamin mentions the legend of Prometheus as a model for the admirable "miscreant," as one who resists fate and represents the hope for a new law. Moran further relates this idea of Prometheus as an admirable miscreant to Kafka's parable on Prometheus. Kafka's reflections dismantle the legend until nothing remains but an inexplicable piece of rock, associated by Moran with the material *Vorwelt*. Kafka's parable on Prometheus will play a central part in the last section dedicated to Anders' thought. In

[2] As pointed out by the translator of the cited text, the German expression is "unterdrückte Vergangenheit", which can be also translated as "suppressed past".

Moran's analysis, it serves to link the idea of miscreant justice with the *Vorwelt* (Moran 2020, 397). Kafka's parable could be read along with Moran's thesis: in the perpetual study it undertakes, (Kafka's) literature disrupts any established conclusion, such that nothing remains but inexplicable matter, whose very inexplicability charges it with infinite possibilities.

***

In his 1938 letter essay, Benjamin refers to his 1934 essay with the following remarks:

> What prejudices me most against that study today is its apologetic character. To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream. There is nothing more memorable than the fervour with which Kafka emphasized his failure. (Benjamin 1994, 566)

The beauty of Kafka's figure is that of a failure. And his neglect of pointing that out in his 1934 essay, says Benjamin, is his own failure. But despite its said "apologetic character," the 1934 essay does mention Kafka's failure:

> His will orders [the destruction of his writings]. This document, which no one interested in Kafka can disregard, says that the writings did not satisfy their author, that he regarded his efforts as failures, that he counted himself among those who were bound to fail. He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings [*Lehre*], to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image" so faithfully. (Benjamin 2005, 808)

According to Benjamin, therefore, Kafka's failure is closely related to his will, where he famously ordered Max Brod, his close friend, to burn all of his unpublished writings including diaries, notes, and letters. In Benjamin's interpretation, this will attests to Kafka's belief that his work is bound to fail, that is, to fail in his grand project of turning poetry into teaching [*Lehre*]. Nevertheless, not everybody sees Kafka's will as an admission of failure. Benjamin himself is aware of Kafka's double gesture. In the 1938 letter essay he concedes that "Kafka presumably had to entrust his posthumous papers to someone who would be unwill-

ing to carry out his last wishes," as "[h]e was obviously unwilling to bear responsibility to posterity for a work whose greatness he was well aware of" (Benjamin 1994, 561).

Nili Cohen further points out that Kafka, a trained lawyer, must have consciously chosen not to write a legally binding will. Instead, two undated and unsent letters addressed to Brod were found in Kafka's room after his death. Cohen suggests that the lack of the proper legal requirements (such as the date and a title framing the text as a "Will") makes the obligation entrusted to Brod a moral instead of a legal one (Cohen 2015, 4). And, as is well known, Brod did not respect Kafka's last wish. Their lack of legal validity and Brod's choice to publish the letters, taken together, point to the letters' significance as literary objects, and their central role in the mythification of the figure of Kafka. Kafka's figure casts a unique, mysterious light on his stories, like the figure of Scheherazade shapes the way the stories of the *Arabian Nights* are read (Cf. Benjamin 2005, 807).

The figure of Kafka, says Benjamin, is that of a failure. He failed in the attempt to turn poetry into teaching [*Lehre*], that is, in making literature instructive. Benjamin's characterisation of Kafka's works indicates that by turning poetry into *Lehre* he means something equivalent to the way rabbinic haggadah is put in the service of halakhah: legal and practical instruction. In the rabbinic context, this *Lehre* (the halakhah) is directed at members of the Jewish community, instructing them on how to maintain a Jewish existence in a gentile world. In Kafka's case, a *Lehre* would have been directed at the modern individual, providing orientation in a morally chaotic and politically hostile world. But Kafka failed. He did not provide instruction to the modern individual in her perplexity.

Benjamin's critique of Kafka and his grand plans for poetry and literature is pronounced in the context of a generally positive reading, which leaves room for hope. We have seen how both Liska and Moran, in markedly different ways, ascribe to Kafka's literature, through Benjamin, a positive role within political reality. According to Liska, Kafka's literature, much like rabbinic haggadah, provides a necessary delimitation of the law while keeping it intact; according to Moran, Kafka's literature opposes the oppressive law and redeems a primaeval space of possibilities. Next, we turn to a thinker whose critique of Kafka is much more biting, and who, at the outset at least, is quite pessimistic when it comes to the capacity of literature to be a vehicle of change.

Günther Anders: *Kafka, Pro und Contra*

Günther Anders' book, *Kafka, Pro und Contra*, originally published in 1951, opens with the following quote from Kafka's notes: "I have heartily taken in the negative aspects of my time, a time very close to me, which I have no right to fight but only, as it were, represent" (Ander 1972, 7. Translated by the author). This quote contains, in a nutshell, the main charge Anders levels against Kafka: namely, that he did nothing more than represent the oppressive powers of the age in which he lived, and by doing so silently complied with these powers. The same entry in Kafka's diaries, dated February 25, 1918, begins thus: "It is not laziness, ill-will, clumsiness—even if there is a bit of each, as the 'vermin is born of the void'—that bring about all my failures: family life, friendship, marriage, career, literature, but the lack of ground, of air, of instruction" (Kafka 1966, 120. Translated by the author). It is as if Kafka, anticipating a future critique of his failures, prepared his apologetic address in a formulation that strikes a chord with anyone familiar with works like *The Trial*, *The Castle*, or *The Metamorphosis*.

In the introduction to his 1984 book *Mensch ohne Welt*, where the text of his Kafka book appears as a chapter, Anders writes about the time of his exile in France, where he was a refugee deprived of legal documents. In the eyes of the authorities, undocumented people like him were 'something' [*etwas*] politically insignificant (Anders 2022, xxxiii). And without old documents, such was the law, a person could not be issued new ones. Under such Kafkaesque circumstances, Anders contends, one did not read Kafka or write about him; one had more pressing things to take care of, like putting bread on one's table. Interestingly enough, this is precisely how Anders justifies his engagement with Kafka in the same years: he needed a job, and the *Institut d'Études Germaniques* ordered a lecture on a German writer. He chose to talk about Kafka (Anders 2022, xxxiii-xxxiv).

The lecture, given in 1934 in Paris, was framed by Anders as a 'warning' (Anders 2022, xxxiv), even as he warned an audience who had never before heard the name Kafka of an impending Kafka plague (Anders 2022, xxxvi). Years later, years Anders spent in exile as the Second World War was raging, the Parisian lecture developed into a small book. The 1951 book, beyond being a forthright and insightful (if sometimes reductive) reading of Kafka's work, is a fascinating piece of evidence of Anders' complex and ambivalent relationship to Kafka. The book's

title and subtitle—*Kafka, Pro und Contra: Die Prozeß-Unterlagen*—reflect the inner logic of the text, which serves as a written trial for Kafka's work. It ends with the questions: "Guilty, then?" (Not exactly, but dangerous still), and "Should we therefore destroy his works?" (No, but we should warn against their fascination) (Anders 1960, 98-99). Anders' conviction that one should warn against Kafka, or rather take Kafka's work as a warning, already present in the 1934 lecture, is indeed echoed in the book:

> Not to know what may be demanded of one, nor why, and yet to respond always with the fervent and meticulous care proper to a cult: how is it possible to admire the literary reflection (however skilfully 'distorted') of this terrible condition? As a warning perhaps. (Anders 1960, 77)

This statement appears to be the product of self-reflection, for Anders himself is quite fascinated by Kafka's 'skilful distortions', and the whole book, it could be claimed, is an attempt to tame and justify Anders' admiration of Kafka's literary skill by turning it into a warning.

Anders revolts as he time and again falls under the spell of Kafka's skilful twists. One thing that invokes Anders' admiration is Kafka's use of distortion as a magnified form of realism: Kafka's narratives, says Anders, are like scientific experiments with modern humans. By placing humans under artificial conditions, in a literary laboratory, Kafka is capable of arriving closer to the truth (Anders 1960, 9-10). Thus, for example, in *The Cares of a Family Man*, Kafka describes "a creature called Odradek. At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool of thread […] One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; at least there is no sign of it" (Kafka 2018, 459). The depiction of this functionless half-object half-creature, Anders points out, draws our attention to the incomprehensible and often ill-suited mechanical objects that fill up our world. A world full of objects not meant for us is an alienated world, where the boundaries between objects and creatures are blurred to the point of reversing their roles (Anders 1960, 12-13). Thus, the narrator (the implied *Family Man*) reflects: "Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. […] the idea that

he is likely to survive me I find almost painful" (Kafka 2018, 460). In such an alienated world, says Anders, people become mere things (Anders 1960, 12).[3]

Another feature of Kafka's work that Anders finds striking is that the most unusual, even the most horrible things pass as everyday normalities (Anders 1960, 13-15). "At the beginning of the story *In the Penal Colony*, for example, an officer shows an explorer a highly complex and diabolically conceived execution machine, such as the world had never seen before the time of Hitler's instruments of mass murder. But the epithet which the officer uses to describe the machine is nothing more than 'peculiar'; and the explorer is merely 'not very interested in the machine'" (Anders 1960, 14). This gives Kafka's works the feeling of a silent explosion (Anders 1960, 13). But Anders actually sees this inversion as a critical technique: "In order to bring home to us that the things which are accepted as a matter of course in our world are horrible, Kafka inverts the terms and treats *blatant horrors* as a matter of course" (Anders 1960, 15).

In the last section, we will see how Jean-Michel Rabaté develops Anders' appreciation of Kafka's critical elements into a full-fledged thesis. Kata Gellen, conversely, emphasises Anders' frustration with Kafka for his lack of criticism and hence his apparent compliance with the oppressive regimes his narratives depict. This is the topic of the following section.

Literature as Compliance

In her article, "Kafka, Pro and Contra: Günther Anders's Holocaust Book," Kata Gellen reads Anders' Kafka book against its historical context. Focusing on Anders' moral critique of Kafka, Gellen points out its theoretical weaknesses while recognising its social significance. Gellen calls our attention to the apparent contradiction between Anders' positions and actions: on the one hand, Anders insists that in a world familiar with the horrors of the Holocaust and nuclear war, engaging with literature is a senseless luxury; on the other hand, throughout his career he was quite occupied with Kafka's literary works (Gellen 2016, 284-85). Motivated by the need to resolve this contradiction, Gellen proposes a reading of Anders' work which shifts the role of Kafka regarding the horrific events that took place after his death.

[3] It is quite likely that Anders reads into Kafka his own personal experience of becoming merely 'something' in his undocumented existence, even though the German *etwas* is admittedly not as close to *Ding* as their English equivalents.

According to Gellen, Anders believes that those who deem Kafka a 'prophet of doom' (like many of his readers) are misguided in their reading of Kafka. Anders overturns the power relations in Kafka's narrative as they are commonly understood, claiming that Kafka did not write for the weaklings and losers, but for the oppressors, the "sons and grandsons of Eichmann" (Gellen 2016, 296). Kafka, says Anders, did not give voice to the weak and oppressed but instead created an image of a morally neutral world, where guilt and punishment are divorced, which absolves the oppressor from responsibility (Gellen 2016, 285-86). In *The Castle*, for example, the village people's acceptance of power amounts to a naive, if horrible, identification of might with right (Anders 1960, 87). Anders' reflection on Kafka's depiction of obedience for the sake of obedience, belief for the sake of belief, develops into an observation on Kafka's last wish:

> Kafka is rehearsing the paradox of modern belief: that what is believed in is not the religious truth of any specific belief, but belief itself as the only 'true' attitude. […] And this is what he himself feared, and why he doubted the value of his work. It is indeed a genuine and terrible moral problem. The usual explanation—that he was dissatisfied with his work on purely artistic grounds—is like suggesting that Saul became Paul because the aesthetic qualities of orthodox Judaism did not satisfy him. It is because his writing possessed in the last analysis *only* artistic perfection that he considered it suspect and therefore ordered it to be destroyed. (Anders 1960, 95)

Gellen's reading of Anders is much influenced by Brod's critique of his essay (Gellen 2016, 296). In Brod's hyperbole, Anders ascribes to Kafka a proto-fascist ideology. Gellen is quick to reject this accusation, but contends it is not completely unfounded: Anders understood Kafka to have betrayed the oppressed and, in particular, the Jews, not because Kafka sided with the oppressor but because he only represented the oppressed from the oppressor's position. "According to Anders," Gellen writes succinctly, "Kafka writes the story of the loser, but from the perspective of the winner" (Gellen 2016, 297). While Gellen does not go as far as Brod, she deems the harsh criticism levelled by Anders as unjustified. She holds Anders' psychological and moral analysis of Kafka's work too simplistic and improperly motivated by personal anger (Gellen 2016, 300-1). Nevertheless, Anders' analysis is valuable as it provides a different paradigm for the relationship between Kafka and the Holocaust, endowing Kafka's work not with prophetic qualities but instead with after-the-fact use value. Furthermore, Anders' work offers significant insights into German postwar society in its attempts to deal with the inescapable guilt of their past (Gellen 2016, 301-5).

As already mentioned, Gellen's analysis is motivated by the question of how Anders can be so preoccupied with the social value of Kafka's work and at the same time undermine the capacity of literature to intervene in socio-political reality. Anders concludes his textual trial of Kafka with the following verdict:

> [Kafka's] work could never be of use either to himself or to others as positive counsel; but as a warning it may be truly helpful to us after all. (Anders 1960, 99)

Possibly inspired by this formulation, Gellen puts forward two conclusions. The first attempts to explain Kafka's value for Anders and resolve the apparent psychological contradiction in Anders' position. While denying the value of Kafka's work for resistance, says Gellen, Anders uses it to reckon with the harsh realities of his past and present. His denouncement of literature (and in particular, of Kafka's,) is part of his valuable diagnosis. Gellen's second conclusion attempts to explain the value of Anders' Kafka analysis for his readers. Dismissing the value of Anders' analysis as literary or cultural critique, she finds in Anders' book a valuable diagnosis of the state of postwar German society in its attempts to make peace with its guilt. In Particular, Gellen takes Anders' warning against a 'Kafka plage' seriously, seconding his critique against a postwar German society that refuses to take responsibility for its actions, turning instead its *Kunstbewunderung* of Kafka's work into a moral defence (Gellen 2016, 302-4).

Literature as Derision

Jean-Michel Rabaté, in his article "Laughing with Kafka after Promethean Shame," presents an antithetical reading of Anders' Kafka through the prism of one of Anders' better-known notions. Anders' idea of Promethean shame, developed in the essay "Über Prometheische Scham" in his book *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, "could be called a first theory of the 'posthuman'" (Rabaté 2018, 96). Anders takes the myth of Prometheus, the fire thief who with his beneficent intentions marked humans as inherently insufficient[4], to reflect on humans' experience of inadequacy in a world inhabited by machines. Underlying Anders' notion of Promethean shame

[4] According to one version of the myth, when Epimetheus, Prometheus' twin brother, created humankind, he already granted all his good gifts—wings, strength, swiftness etc.—to the animals, so no protection was left for humans. To make up for his brother's thoughtless act, Prometheus gave humans the gift of fire (Hamilton 1998, 85-86).

is a critique of technology which takes the latter to be—instead of a neutral tool to be utilised in the hands of a human agent—a space of possibility that shapes the limits of humans' physical, emotional, and moral capacities (Müller 2016, 3). Promethean shame refers to the feeling of shame and unworthiness humans might experience in the face of perfectly efficient, functionally manufactured and reproducible machines: the shame of powerlessness, the shame of ageing, the shame of being born (Rabaté 2018, 96-98). From this point of powerlessness, Rabaté maintains, humans' main weapon—not against nature, but against the machine world, originally created to protect them from the indifference of nature only to be later turned against them—is derision (Rabaté 2018, 89). Since every form of power has arbitrary and mechanical, and hence ridiculous, aspects, every form of power can be laughed at (Rabaté 2018, 89, 108). And laughter is the principal image through which Rabaté portrays Kafka.

As Rabaté points out, "[i]t 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" (Rabaté 2018, 100). Rabaté wishes to show, further, that it is the notion of Promethean shame in particular which closely relates to Kafka. Shame, he points out, is a dominant theme in Kafka's work; *The Trial*, to take one example, ends with the dramatic note following K.'s execution: "It seemed as if his shame would live on after him" (Kafka 2009, 165). The figure of Prometheus also features in Kafka's work; one of Kafka's parables proposes a reconstruction of the myth of Prometheus. Before analysing the parable, Rabaté presents it in full:

> 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.
>
> 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 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.*] (Rabaté 2018, 102)

In his reading of the parable, Rabaté focuses on two terms in particular: *Erklärung* and *Grund*. Within the dynamics of the parable, the *Wahrheitsgrund* gives rise to a groundless affair, and the attempts to explain the inexplicable (as we are told from the beginning) end in vain. Kafka's four legends depict a progressive dissolution of the myth: the first and second present the narrative, the third dissolves the narrative through forgetting, the fourth expresses despair with the very attempt to explain. The *Wahrheitsgrund*, the ground of truth, referring to the rock as the material support for the truth of the myth, is eventually relegated to a dumb piece of matter (Rabaté 2018, 102-5).

It is not entirely clear that Kafka's Prometheus parable can be linked to Anders' Promethean shame beyond their shared origin in the myth. Yet, curiously, Kafka's Prometheus parable addresses the same problem that occupied Anders concerning Kafka's work: namely, the inadequacy of literature in the face of inexplicable reality. Interestingly, Rabaté uses Anders' notion to support his thesis that Kafka's work extends "a fully-fledged political critique" (Rabaté 2018, 89). While Anders recognises Kafka's derision of power, he considers it the feeble resistance of the powerless and stresses the potential moral damage of Kafka's work (Anders 1960, 51-52). "The book of Job," writes Anders, "which Kafka kept by him throughout his life, provides an illuminating parallel" (Anders 1960, 89). Job's submission to God is motivated by his own powerlessness before God, but the power of God is attested through the laughable remark that he created the hippopotamus and the crocodile. For Anders, it should be noted, derision is not an effective weapon; to judge by Job's example, it is the futile cry of the powerless in their submission.

Conclusion

Each of the four models presented above—literature as delimitation and deferral, literature as disruption, literature as compliance, and literature as derision—originates in an interpretation of Kafka's work by either Benjamin or Anders. Like interpretations of Kafka, they are most valuable when taken, instead of competing, as complementary models. As Anders puts it, Kafka's medium is doubt, which finds

expression in the unremitting dialogues and reflections that fill up his stories (Anders 1960, 89). To do justice to Kafka's work and figure, one should admit that even on the value of his own works, Kafka was in doubt. For this reason, he wrote the legally non-binding letters expressing his 'last wish', unable to resist the temptation to (posthumously!) stage a scene that would express his yet unresolved doubts on issues that occupied him in his lifetime: the place of law, the value of literature, the validity of instruction.

In spite of his brilliant reading of Kafka's work, Benjamin fails to develop a critique of Kafka following his comment on Kafka's failure to provide instruction. From a socio-political point of view, Benjamin's overall positive reading of Kafka and literature's role—whether we read it with Liska as delimitation and deferral or with Moran as disruption—misses or ignores several aspects of Kafka's work and reception underscored by Anders' critique. One such point could be presented through the well-known parable *Before the Law*. The countryman's lifelong failed attempts to enter the law have been interpreted, inspired by Benjamin's reading, as a positive deferral of judgment and even as a deliberate exhaustion of the law's mechanisms. But Anders' critique of Kafka's position gives rise to a different interpretation of the parable. The stranger who arrives at an unfamiliar world tries so hard to belong that he follows customs as if they were religious rules. From the point of view of the outsider, says Anders, all customs appear as "pre-judgments, passed *before* he came" (Anders 1960, 27). Even though Anders does not explicitly mention the parable here, it is hard not to read this remark as an interpretation of *Before the Law*[5]: the door in front of which the countryman stands appears to him as the door of the law only because he stands *outside* (or *before*); mistaking life for law, he cannot gain access to it and will forever remain an outsider.

Relating it to the political conditions of his time, Anders writes:

> Kafka sees the problem of the alien, the newcomer, the Jew, through the eyes of those who do not accept the alien. Thus, Kafka is a rationalist ashamed of his position—like all those Jews who try to conform to the customs and habits of a country whose constitution does not proclaim the rationalistic recognition of the rights of every man, the alien included, *as a man.* (Ander 1960, 28)

In a similar vein, we find in Anders' reading a counterpart image to Benjamin's "mighty paw." The image presented by Benjamin depicts Kafka's stories as

[5] Anders takes this position as the sole perspective of Kafka's work: "Indeed Kafka's entire work could well bear the title 'The Prejudice'" (Ander 1960, 28).

half-domesticated animals which, despite their apparent servility have a threatening presence. We have seen how Liska interprets this image as the power of literature to keep law within its proper boundaries or postpone it indefinitely, and how Moran interprets it even more radically as literature's undermining of law's rationale. Anders proposes another image of an animal, which corresponds to the model of literature as compliance. Kafka's gracefulness, says Anders, "is like the grace of a playful dog, which gambols about its master, the over-powering world" (Anders 1960, 70).

Beyond ascribing to Kafka a subversive intent he may have never had, Anders contends, there is another danger to be avoided, namely the aesthetic fascination stirred by Kafka's work:

> If it is true that this fusion of the beautiful and the terrible is the source of widespread admiration for Kafka today, then we must seriously ask ourselves whether the time for such aesthetic pleasures has not passed. For the terrible in our time means the secret police and concentration camps and gas-chambers; it means power in a form which it is disastrous to idealize. (ibid., 61)

As Gellen aptly puts it, Anders "warns against substituting aesthetics for ethics" (Gellen 2016, 302). "There are still readers of Kafka today," Anders writes, "who do not question *what* exactly it is that appeals to their sensibility. It is all 'literature', it is all 'significant', even if what it signifies is their own utter irrelevance" (Anders 1960, 65). Anders believed that Kafka, unlike his readers, was aware of the shortcomings of his own literature—excelling as it is in aesthetic perfection but lacking in moral instruction—which is the reason he wished his works to be destroyed.

Despite their major differences, both Benjamin and Anders attribute to literature in general, and to Kafka's literature in particular, great power, whether constructive or destructive. When it comes to Kafka, it seems he was less sure. "The legend tries to explain the inexplicable," he wrote in the beginning of his Prometheus parable, reflecting on the place of narrative confronted by material reality. As time passes, Kafka wrote further, the legend that tries to explain the inexplicable is forgotten, everyone grows weary of it, until nothing remains but "the inexplicable mass of rock" (Rabaté 2018, 102).

Bat Chen Seri, PhD Cand.,
Centre for Theology and Religious Studies
Lund University, bat_chen.seri[at]ctr.lu.se

References

Anders, Günther. 1960. *Franz Kafka*. London: Bowes & Bowes.

Anders, Günther. 1972. *Kafka, Pro und Contra: die Prozeß-Unterlagen.* München: C.H. Beck.

Anders, Günther. 2022. *Mensch ohne Welt: Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*. München: C.H. Beck.

Benjamin, Walter. 1981. *Benjamin über Kafka: Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, Walter. 1994. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 2005. *Selected Writings. Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931-1934.* Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 2006. *Selected Writings. Vol. 4, 1938-1940*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Benjamin, Walter, and Gershom Scholem. 1989. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*. New York: Schocken Books.

Cohen, Nili. 2015. "The Betrayed(?) Wills of Kafka and Brod." *Law and Literature* 27 (1): 1-21.

Gellen, Kata. 2016. "Kafka, Pro and Contra: Günther Anders's Holocaust Book." In *Kafka and the Universal*, edited by Arthur Cools and Vivian Liska, 283-306. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

Halbertal, Moshe. 2011. "At the Threshold of Forgiveness. A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud." *Jewish Review of Books* 7 (1): 33-34.

Hamacher, Werner. 2005. "'Now': Walter Benjamin and Historical Time." In *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, 38-68. London: Continuum.

Hamilton, Edith. 1998. *Mythology*. Boston: Back Bay Books.

Kafka, Franz. 1966. *Hochzeitsvorbereitung auf dem Lande, und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer.

Kafka, Franz. 1991. *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*. Cambridge: Exact Change.

Kafka, Franz. 2009. *The Trial*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

Kafka, Franz. 2018. *The Complete Short Stories*. London: Vintage.

Liska, Vivian. 2022. "Law and Sacrifice in Kafka and Hid Readers." *Interdisciplinary journal for religion and transformation in contemporary society* 8 (2): 256-274.

Moran, Brendan. 2020. "Literature as Miscreant Justice: Benjamin and Scholem Debate Kafka's Law." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 34 (3): 390-406.

Müller, Christopher John. 2016. *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*. London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. 2018. "Laughing with Kafka after Promethean Shame." *Problemi International* 2 (2): 89-117.