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Kafka and the Dialect of Minor Literature

S T A N L E Y C O R N G O L D

In one's own language, however, were one only to say something as exactly and as uncompromisingly as possible, one might also hope through such relentless effort to become understandable as well.¹

The phrase in my title "the dialect of minor literature" is meant to convey two things at once. It alludes first to Kafka as an author writing in the language of a so-called minor literature—if, by much stretching of the point, one could speak of the German of Prague authors as the vehicle of a minor literature. This claim, I should like to stress right from the start, is hyperbolic, since the German that Kafka spoke was at most only a faintly dialectical coloration of High German, barely audible as a regional sociolect and not the distinctive language of a community.

Still, Kafka's relation to Prague *literary* German is a significant one, especially as it is developed in the work, for example, of Rilke, Brod, and Werfel. Kafka's reaction points chiefly to his discreet repugnance to its perfumed literariness. Moreover, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their much-cited *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, have already valorized this tension in order to turn Kafka's literary German into a kind of polemical ideolect aimed against high German literature—the literary language of Greater Germany (*Großdeutschland*).² The misleading claim that Kafka wrote in *dialect* regularly crops up, most recently in the introduction by Joachim Neugroschel to his new translations of Kafka's stories. He writes, "Kafka's oeuvre has

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now become a monument to Prague German, which, like so many *dialects* and regional variants of German, was liquidated by the Fascist era” (qtd. in Talbot 15; emphasis added). Max Brod, the more trustworthy authority, insists that Kafka, along with almost all Germans in Prague, did not speak so-called “Prague German” (*Prager Deutsch*). “The German of the Prague German-speaker was distinctive only for its somewhat harsh accent; on the other hand, we were extremely careful not to let locally-conditioned deviations get into the written language.”³

Kafka, in fact, had very definite ideas about the difference between “dialect” and what he called, appreciatively, “the most individual High German.” True, he thought them both sources of liveliness as compared with the jejune middle ground of daily spoken German (“nothing but embers”). But he never considered his work as written in dialect in any sense whatever. Perhaps as “mauscheln”—German spoken with a Yiddish flair, a “fine . . . organic compound of bookish German and pantomime”—but he means this grimly pejorative word to describe his literary language only in an ironic and elliptical way (“im weitesten Sinn genommen”) (*Letters to Friends* 288; *Briefe* 336-37). Kafka’s relation to Yiddish literature, a literature he could read but not write, is another story altogether—an important one now being explored.⁴

In citing “the dialect of minor literature,” however, I am also alluding to another tendency in contemporary criticism that is very interesting and, I think, equally wrong-headed. A certain critical discourse or indeed critical (read “politicizing”) dialect concerned with the literature of small nations has sprung up—a literature said to be exemplary. This thesis is advanced primarily in and around colonial studies, but it also appears in Kafka studies as well, as an offshoot, once again, of Deleuze and Guattari’s book on Kafka and minor literature, in which Kafka’s work is said to construct “linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape” (27). Deleuze and Guattari’s eponymous figure of the “anti-Oedipus” also belongs to this discussion, in which Kafka turns out, somewhat surprisingly, to be the anti-Oedipus *par excellence*.

This debate, of course, may be viewed as part of the very one taking place in Central and Eastern Europe, where critics and writers are displaying a heightened awareness of the long suppressed topic of national character. After years of prohibition, they have become intent on defining their sense of national and ethnic specificity—as, for example, in Prague and Vilnius and Kiev. This is true, too, of cultural Croatians, Romanians, and Estonians in and outside their homeland. I am alluding here to the phenomenon that Professor Timothy Reiss has called “the falling back into the local.”

In this context the retranslation and reinterpretation of Kafka’s own stories and novels acquire a special significance. Consider, for example, the energy and enthusiasm of Kafka’s Czech translators in the light of Václav Havel’s allusions to Kafka as the inspiration for a necessary, legitimizing anxiety-in-government. The ongoing Central and Eastern European use of Kafka aims chiefly to open a source of political and polemical impulses heightening the self-consciousness of peoples living on the margin of great powers. In all this, another sort of reading of Kafka is taking place implicitly as well. For when Central and Eastern European intellectuals address questions of their own ethnic or national identity, they are thinking willy-nilly about Kafka’s now famous

five-page diary entry on the literature of small nations. This essay occupies a central position in Deleuze and Guattari's account of Kafka's own work as the project of someone writing within the boundaries of a minor literature.⁵ But it is also being used implicitly to justify the contemporary project in Central and Eastern European countries of those who assert their ethnic and linguistic difference in order to resist hegemonic powers, institutions, and discourses.

I said at the beginning that I have little sympathy with much of the use made of Kafka's work in the critical dialect of so-called minor literature. But before saying what might be wrong about such applications—this reaching out to and totalizing *a modern literature as such* from points allegedly made by Kafka about minor literature—it will be important to try to get hold of Kafka's views as he states them. This will not be easy, since this essay too is a sort of prose poem written by Franz Kafka. I am chiefly concerned with highlighting difficulties in the way of its most straightforward political appropriation.

The diary entry composed on December 25, 1911, opens by asserting that "many of the benefits of literary activity . . . can be produced *even by* a literature whose development is not in actual fact *unusually broad in scope*" (emphasis added). This, we can say, is a minor literature. What actual minor literature does Kafka have in mind? He gives the examples in 1911 of contemporary Yiddish literature in Warsaw—or as much as he knows about it from Löwy, one of the actors appearing in Yiddish plays in Prague that year—as well as "contemporary Czech literature," as he has experienced it. I stress: typical minor literatures for Kafka are Yiddish and Czech—and certainly not, *pace* Deleuze and Guattari, the literature written in the German of Prague authors, in which Kafka intends to make a unique contribution to world literature as one whose very essence is literature (Kafka wrote: "Not a bent for writing, my dearest Felice, not a bent, but my entire self" [*Letters to Felice* 309]).

The benefits of literary activity are significant even when that literature is minor. Kafka's essay begins with an engaging list of its advantages, put together somewhat anarchically, like the Chinese taxonomy of animals quoted from Borges by Foucault at the beginning of *The Order of Things*. Literature, for Kafka, "stirs minds [*bewegt die Geister*] and brings about the unity and solidarity [*das einheitliche Zusammenhalten*] of national consciousness, which, in social life, is often inactive and [whether active or not] is forever disintegrating there" (*Diaries 1910-13* 191; *Tagebücher* 312-13). Literature could therefore never reflect or contain—it would more nearly constitute—a national consciousness always in the process of dissolving outside its frame. From this constitution arises "the pride and support that the nation gains for itself in the face of a hostile environment" (*Diaries 1910-13* 191; *Tagebücher* 313). Literary production could therefore be likened to "keeping a diary by a nation—something entirely different from historiography," because this diary-keeping amounts to a "detailed spiritualization" (*detaillierte Vergeistlichung* [sic]) of the broad scope of public life. (The orthographical slip is bemusing: *Stich* means the stab of a knife, the sting of an insect, the pang of a pain—the stroke of a pen. And just some eighteen months before, Kafka had begun keeping his diary in order to strengthen his hurt pride, as a blocked writer, in the "face of a hostile environment" [see Corngold, "'You,' I Said"].) The process of diary-keeping, however, is crucial, for by means of it "dissatisfied elements

are assimilated and immediately become useful, since it is only the slack tolerance [*Lässigkeit*] of them that can do harm" (*Diaries 1910-13* 192; *Tagebücher* 313). This is literary idealism in the service of national unity, and at this moment Kafka does not sound very different from Dilthey writing in Germany around 1866.

This view, I might point out, is expressly opposed to that of another rigorous Gnostic writer, Herman Melville, who notes in *Billy Budd* of "such events [as mutiny]": they "cannot be ignored, but there is a considerate way of historically treating them. If a well-constituted individual refrains from blazoning aught amiss or calamitous in his family, a nation in the like circumstance may without reproach be equally discreet" (333). Not so for Kafka, who will pay more than lip-service to this view a year later in writing about the metamorphosis of a Prague millinery salesman into a giant dung beetle, which, as he himself noted, did blazon abroad things more than a little amiss in the family apartment.⁶

What is at stake in the domestic as well as the national sphere is the redemption of dissonance (*die Bindung unzufriedener Elemente*), occurring through "a continual articulation of a people with respect to its experience." In this development "the incessant bustle of the literary magazines plays a key role." Here Kafka's focus appears to have slipped onto the German-speaking Prague scene, with its literary journals and cafés, displaying the fact that the focus throughout this essay is undecidably *binocular*. Kafka is, after all, dealing with *literature* as such and also even and especially *the literature of small nations*. But we should be clear on this point: if Kafka shifts focus to the literary production of Prague authors writing in German, he does so because their work comes under the head of *literature*. The shift is not evidence that Kafka construes his own literary work in German as the literature of a *small nation* of Jewish Prague writers minded to revolt against writing in the German of Goethe and his acolytes (thus Deleuze and Guattari).

The list of literary benefits continues unexpectedly. Literature brings about a "narrowing down of the attention of a nation upon itself [*auf ihren eigenen Kreis*] and the acceptance of what is foreign only in reflection [*in der Spiegelung*]." Literature is, therefore, *as such* less a medium for preserving foreign differences than for producing unity, solidarity, and the assimilation of the foreign within an intimate circle, mirror, or hearth. This point will irritate, of course, any generally postmodern assimilation of this essay to a brief for literature's principled generosity to alien differences, negation of one's own thing, displacement of the circle of intimacy, and so forth.

Literature induces crucial changes in the subjective consciousness of family members: it marks "the birth of a respect for persons active in literature" and brings about

the transitory awakening in the younger generation of higher aspirations, which nevertheless leaves its permanent mark. Furthermore, it produces the acknowledgment of literary events as objects of political concern, the dignification of the antithesis between fathers and sons and the possibility of discussing this; the presentation of national faults in a manner that is especially painful, to be sure, but also liberating and deserving of forgiveness; and the beginning of a lively and therefore self-respecting book trade and the eagerness for books.

Kafka now looks as if he is telling the story of his own literary education.

The above list mingles benefits from various spheres: nationalist ideology; aesthetic education; the economics of art, such as the book trade; and intra-family struggles. Benefits accrue at different levels. One bonus—nothing less than a total unification of national consciousness—mingles with a homelier one: a nicer sort of quarreling between father and son. Under the influence of literature you will no longer find a father saying to his son, around the dinner table, “I’ll tear you apart like a fish!” (Thus Hermann Kafka of Prague [*Letter to His Father* 35].) Perhaps.

This mixing of benefits at different levels could be explained from the different impulses of the writer Kafka at work on this extended diary entry. One should see him here jotting things down rapidly for a future tract on literature and especially small literature—an essay that will be correctly worked out only when its general program has been confirmed or been adjusted by Kafka’s own literary production. (Deleuze and Guattari interpret the jotting as if it had already been saturated with such a future literary experience and hence as Kafka’s official poetics, omitting reflection on the time gap.) On the other hand, the disparities of register in Kafka’s list of literary benefits could point to the spontaneity, swiftness, and gaiety of its composition. The essay on minor literature would then have been written by Kafka not as a writer solemnly projecting in outline his future work but as one joyously and slyly crafting a piece of his work as the writing of a single night and day. The essay is (1) a Christmas caprice—it was composed half on Christmas Eve and half on Christmas Day; (2) a gift to Löwy, the Yiddish actor, and to Mrs. Tchissik, the Yiddish actress, with whom Kafka had fallen in love the previous month (see *Diaries* 139); and (3) a celebration in advance of the joys of nativity of the writer he was about to become. Nine months later, in the early morning of September 23, 1912, Kafka would complete “The Judgment”—his breakthrough—in a single sitting.

There is evidence of high spirits. The definition of a minor literature as one “whose development is not in actual fact unusually broad in scope” is incomplete, for Kafka adds, “but [whose development] seems to be [broad in scope] because it lacks outstanding talents” (*Diaries* 1910-13 192; *Tagebücher* 314; emphasis added). Stop and consider: Yiddish literature in Warsaw is, according to Kafka, an instance of a literature without major talents, one exemplarily not dominated by a single major talent, the struggle with which might conceivably define its whole future direction. In other words, Yiddish literature does not have its Goethe, does not live in the shadow of a single indomitable father talent (not even Mendele).

Of the mighty figure of Goethe Kafka writes in his journal in the midst of composing this entry:

Goethe probably retards the development of the German language by the force of his writing. Even though prose style has often traveled away from him in the interim, still, in the end, as at present, it returns to him with strengthened yearning and even adopts obsolete idioms found in Goethe but otherwise without any particular connection with him, in order to rejoice in the *completeness of its unlimited dependence*. (*Diaries* 1910-13 197; *Tagebücher* 318; emphasis added)

Such a power, semi-divine, of the single instance is a crucial mark of the major

literature. Quite otherwise minor literature—or?

When I discussed this point with a professor of comparative literature at the University of Tel Aviv, he looked at me curiously. Modern Yiddish literature—i. e., Yiddish literature—was without its great precursor? Quite the contrary, he said. For whereas German writers had to contend (only) with Goethe, Yiddish writers had to contend with God: did Kafka mean to suggest that Goethe was a greater writer than God?

This perspective, I might note, would make God—leaving aside all questions of rank—at least a writer. And sometimes Kafka indeed appears to think so, as when he writes, “God doesn’t want me to write—but I, I must” (*Letters to Friends* 10); and, indirectly, too, when he remarks that nothing can compare with the conclusion of Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* except the conclusion of the Fifth Book of Moses, for both works record the failure of a man to arrive at his goal—Frédéric Moreau and Moses too, “not because his life was too short but because it was a human life” (*Diaries 1914-23* 196; *Tagebücher* 867).⁷ If my colleague’s objection is true, it would be a mark of the irrefragable irony of Kafka’s program.

The benefits of literary work are mixed—and by no means easily assimilated in a contemporary climate favoring the fragmentation of integral personality, the radical entitlements of what’s left, and the cultivation of difference. We say it is an altogether worthy enterprise *to understand difference* however hard—an understanding not easily achieved and certainly not by means of such intellectual labor-saving devices (following Walter Benjamin) as empathy (*Einfühlung*) or being in accord (*Einverständnis*) but rather through an obsessional immersion (*Versenkung*) into otherness with all holds barred. This being the case, what are we to make of minor literature’s facility in reflecting what is different only in its own mirror? This point will make it impossible, I believe, to grant minor literature, according to Kafka, a subversive prestige *vis-à-vis* major literature.

We read on, stressing, again according to Kafka, the absence of a dominant talent in minor literature and, as a consequence, its compensatory strength or what he calls its “liveliness” (*Lebhaftigkeit*). The word belongs importantly to his poetics.

The liveliness of such a literature exceeds even that of one rich in talent, for, as it has no writer whose great gifts could silence at least the majority of cavillers, literary competition on the greatest scale has a real justification. A literature not broken into [*nicht durchbrochen*, i. e. *ohne Durchbruch*] by a great talent has, therefore, no gap through which the irrelevant or indifferent might force its way. (*Diaries 1910-13* 192; *Tagebücher* 314)

It has no room for diatribe or aping.

Kafka’s fine insight points up the negativity—the gap—that is the flip side of every genius’s breakthrough in a literary tradition, though it did not stop Kafka from courting nine months later a *Durchbruch* of his own. It creates an entrance for indifferent talents, whose task will be to dispute with and, equally, to imitate uselessly or complete speciously the work of that genius. Let us agree that Kafka’s essay is here at its least Bloomian and most anti-Oedipal and hence most Deleuzian and Guattarian.

The claim to attention of the specifically small literature now becomes

more compelling. In it the independence of the individual writer—within national boundaries—is better preserved. The lack of irresistible national models keeps out writers without genuine talent—polemical types inspired by *ressentiment*. Equally, however, there appears to be a danger associated with writing within a minor literature that arises despite its democracy of talent (in minor literatures, remember, no writers are completely untalented and none are extravagantly talented). Kafka conjures the temptation of exotic influence (the “exotic” and “influence” are the same thing). This is the risk of being “influenced by the indistinct qualities of the fashionable writers of the moment, or of introducing the works of foreign literatures, or of imitating the foreign literature that has already been introduced.” It appears to be less a temptation for writers in a major literature: “this is plain,” writes Kafka, “in a literature rich in great talents, such as German . . . where the worst writers limit their imitation to what they find at home.” The difference between minor and major literature cannot yet be made to support a distinction of greater authenticity if this means resistance to influence.

The fact that some writers have little talent, whether in a minor or a major literature, does not affect the degree of their mimetic desire for the exotic of the moment—fashion—or the exotic from abroad. Even without extreme talents (including extremely weak talents), a minor literature suffers this influence, which has nothing to do with genius. Kafka does not say what the root of this susceptibility is: it is very likely an aspect of character—of an assimilationist bent. If this text were about Kafka, it could identify something like the temptation of “Zionism” that was to interfere with his elaboration of “a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah” (*Diaries* 203; *Tagebücher* 878).⁸

Kafka forces his way past this present difficulty of making a value distinction by turning to the past—to tradition:

The force . . . of a literature poor in its component parts proves especially effective when it begins to create a literary history out of the records of its dead writers. These writers’ undeniable influence, past and present, becomes so matter-of-fact that it can take the place of their writings. One speaks of the latter [their writings] and means the former [their influence], indeed, one even reads [their writings] and sees only [their influence]. But since that influence cannot be forgotten, and since the writings themselves do not act independently upon the memory, there is no forgetting and no remembering again. Literary history offers an unchangeable, dependable whole [*einen Block*] that is hardly affected by the taste of the day.

The literary history of small nations is a “whole” because it exhibits no hysteresis between two histories: between the popular consciousness of a writer’s work—a kind of sediment of the history of its reception—and an actual knowledge of it—the inner history of the work studied. (Words in literature “echo or resonate with their historicity, that is . . . are expressive or reflective of their contexts.” Even more, they “situate you in their historicity in the sense of exposing you to it, placing you under its claims. . . .” Thus Gerald Bruns [15].) Agreed, the manufacture of literary history in small nations does not follow a model guaranteeing good results either as history or as textual knowledge—and hence is not exemplary. Still the beautiful outcome, however illusory, is that literary history becomes the sacramental time of small nations.

This view, too, will not be attractive to the postmodern interest in revising canons, and indeed it has its down side for Kafka as well—congregational bias. Observe the fall.

A small nation's memory is not smaller than the memory of a large one and so can process [*verarbeiten*] the existing material more thoroughly. There are, to be sure, fewer experts in literary history employed, but literature is less a concern of literary history than of the people; and thus, if not purely, it is at least reliably preserved. For the claims that the national consciousness of a small people makes on the individual are such that everyone must always be prepared to know that part of the literature which comes down to him, to support it, to defend it—to defend it even if he does not know it and support it.

High spirits, gaiety, irony!

The old writings acquire a multiplicity of interpretations; despite the mediocre material, this goes on with an energy that is restrained only by the fear that one may too easily exhaust them⁹ and by the reverence they are accorded by common consent. Everything is done very honestly, only within a bias that is never resolved . . . and is broadcast for miles around when a skillful hand is lifted up. But in the end bias interferes not only with a broad view [*Ausblick*] but with a close insight [*Einblick*] as well.

“So that”—concludes Kafka—“all these observations are cancelled out”!
Finally

since people [of small nations] lack a sense of context, their literary activities are out of context too. (They depreciate something in order to be able to look down upon it from above, or they praise it to the skies in order to have a place up there beside it. Wrong.) Even though something is often thought through calmly, one still does not reach the boundary where it connects up with similar things, one reaches soonest the boundary with politics, indeed, one even strives to see it before it is there, and often sees this limiting boundary everywhere. The narrowness of the field, the concern too for simplicity and uniformity, and, finally, the consideration that the inner independence of the literature makes the external connection with politics harmless, result in the dissemination of literature throughout a country on the basis of its clinging to political slogans [*sich an den politischen Schlagworten festhält*].

“*Festhalten*” [clinging] is also the word Kafka uses to describe the relation in 1912 of Gregor Samsa, the transmogrified salesman, to his fetish—the glass-encased woman in furs whom he once pinned up on his bedroom wall. The gesture suggests the most primitive attempt at covering up a loss of authority, of holding on to the rhetoric of lost identity.

In wanting to celebrate this aspect of minor literature—its ineluctably, instantaneously political character—Deleuze and Guattari are required to leave out these last sentences, for they damage their *valorization* of minor literature on radical grounds. These sentences say that *the literature of small nations disseminates itself by means of clinging to political slogans*. Kafka concludes:

There is [in minor literature] universal delight in the literary treatment of petty themes whose scope is not permitted to exceed the capacity of small enthusiasms and which are sustained by their polemical prospects and

resources. Insults, given literary treatment, roll back and forth; in circles of writers with a great deal of temperament, they fairly fly. What in great literatures goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone not less than as a matter of life and death. (*Diaries 1910-13* 194; *Tagebücher* 322)

I want to stress now Deleuze and Guattari's use—not reading—of this essay, their misprision of Kafka's already quite idiosyncratic and varied views on minor literature, and shall proceed by way of personal experience. In 1987, in Philadelphia, I lectured to an audience on Kafka's aphorisms, analyzing their shapes of chiasmi and double helixes. The subject matter was formal, the question period, however, unexpectedly substantial. I was immediately asked, in the spirit of a small nation, for additional information about the character and personality of Kafka—for example, had he played basketball? I replied, no; although he was quite tall (nearly six feet) and supple from exercise and, furthermore, in a remote sense, Czech, living in Prague, he was not a Croatian: it is Dalmatian Croatia that has produced excellent basketball players. This prompted an elderly woman, tired of those fumbling German translations, to ask, "Well then, can you tell us what Kafka is like in the original Czech?"

This question could have been prompted by her reading of Deleuze and Guattari. Their appropriation of Kafka's essay begins: "The problem of expression is staked out by Kafka not in an abstract and universal fashion but in relation to those literatures that are considered minor, for example the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague." Note: "the Jewish literature of Prague." This is entirely Deleuze and Guattari's example! In his own essay, of course, Kafka literally wrote "Czech literature," something of which he was not a part. These critics continue: "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language [but of course it does, for Kafka: it comes from Yiddish and from Czech]; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). This last point would have come as a great surprise to Kafka—that throughout his life he was at work constructing a Jewish Prague literature, meaning to do so by heightening the idiomatic disparities of Prague German. Deleuze and Guattari assert this thesis via a claim for the dignity of writing in a minor language. "Using the path that Yiddish opens up to him"—Yiddish, according to Deleuze and Guattari, being "intermixed with the German language in Czechoslovakia" (*sic*; 20)—"Kafka takes it in such a way as to convert it into a unique and solitary form of writing" (25). But this idea, even apart from the absurd implication that the German Kafka spoke in the office and café was "intermixed" with Yiddish, will not do, for it leaves out too baldly the elected influences of Goethe, Hegel, and Nietzsche, not to mention Kafka's "blood relations" Kleist, Grillparzer, Dostoevsky, and Flaubert, in developing the "uniqueness and solitude" of Kafka's writing. And even if, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, "unique and solitary," Kafka's writing would have amounted to a minor literature of one. In the end Deleuze and Guattari substitute the powers of dialect for what in Kafka are more truly the powers of dialectic—and here point up the decline of Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image.

The theory of the dialectical image, a moment of explosive historical meaning, is spelled out in "Sheaf [*Konvolut*] 'N'" of the Arcades project (*Passagenwerk*), where Benjamin writes:

It is not the case that things past cast their light on the present; or that present things cast their light on the past. But the Image is that in which, in a flash, the past comes together [*zusammentritt*] into a constellation with the Now. In other words, Image is dialectic at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the past to the Now is dialectical; is not process or flow [*Verlauf*] but rather image . . . by leaps! And the place where one comes across dialectical images is language.¹⁰

This concept, nourished by Benjamin's understanding of Kafka, has been narrowed, especially under the impact of views on the recent national revolutions, into an idea of determinative dialect, into the idea of the gesture that resists a dominant political and linguistic power by means of dialect. An ideological image of the dialect undeservedly called "historical" replaces the idea of the dialectical image. This idea is then turned back onto Kafka with the purpose of coloring him as an estranged Yiddish-Czech political writer—qualities that are then said to reemerge in his work written in German—and stripping him of the universality that an allegedly lazy tradition of criticism has ascribed to him.

Is the concrete universality of the dialectical image to be found in its local color? I think not. What is truly dialectical in Kafka, as Benjamin suggests, is his *destruction* of metaphors and of the given image. Kafka's "images" are not properly images—they are not positives. Rather, they are negatives: they are the fission products of the destruction (metamorphosis, deconstruction) of the imagery of standard metaphors. Kafka's explosion of the image suggests the force contained as a history of repressions in each such figurative nucleus. This is quite in line with Benjamin's own perspective, for Kafka's tropes are dialectical in the Benjaminian sense of continually liberating the repressed implications of dead metaphors. This procedure does not require dialect to be carried through (see Corngold, *Franz Kafka*, esp. chapt. 3 and 10).

Deleuze and Guattari confuse an automatic potential in Prague German—as idiom or dialect—with Kafka's *own* German. Kafka wrote, "As soon as a man comes along who has something primitive about him, so that he does not say: One must take the world as it is . . . but who says: However the world is, I shall stay with my original nature, which I am not about to change to suit what the world regards as good; the moment this word is pronounced, a metamorphosis takes place in the whole of existence" (*Letters to Friends* 203). There is in Deleuze and Guattari no such category of "original nature." It is important to note that the word stubbornly pronounced does not have to come from dialect (*Letters to Friends* 277).

Deleuze and Guattari enthusiastically politicize literature. But it is not so much that Kafka's work, being, allegedly, minor literature, permits of this appropriation as that Deleuze and Guattari are themselves writing in the idiom of minor literature, politicizing wherever they go. This is a feature of life in a minor literature, but it is not true that Kafka's essay defends it.

Deleuze and Guattari deny, in Kafka's name, the subjective aspirations of individuals. Kafka says exactly the opposite: minor literature encourages "the independence of the individual writer" (*Diaries 1910-13* 192; *Tagebücher* 314).

I conclude: On the strength of Kafka's views on minor literature, no argument can be made for the politicization of literature—for justifying its polemical use in heightening the adversarial consciousness of being minor and mar-

ginal with respect to a major language or literature. It is true that literature, for Kafka, “brings about the unity and solidarity of national consciousness . . .” whence there arise “the pride and support which the nation gains for itself in the face of a hostile environment” (*Diaries 1910-13* 191; *Tagebücher* 313). But at what cost to its quality! “There is [in minor literature] universal delight in the literary treatment of petty themes whose scope is not permitted to exceed the capacity of small enthusiasms and which are sustained by their polemical prospects and resources” (*Diaries 1910-13* 194; *Tagebücher* 322). Kafka does not teach you that a consciousness of ethnic or dialect-ical peculiarity increases your chances of building escape routes, across a sense of oppression, from a hegemonic literature, let alone of exploding its authority.

Reading Deleuze/Guattari on Kafka suggests that you can read in order to formulate political slogans—that might be useful. Or you can prefer to close-read texts. That could be politically vacuous yet still produce a sense of power, in the way, say, that reading Kafka or a critic like Benjamin reading Kafka gives you a sense of power. But it is wrong to say that the closely-read text gives authority to political slogans.

Kafka’s relation to the traditions of his literary community is no different in principle from that of other German and European writers who turned for inspiration to non-European sources (thus Goethe to Persian poetry, Schopenhauer to Sanskrit literature, Yeats and Brecht to Noh, Pound to Chinese ideograms). This field covers Kafka’s increasing sensitivity to the themes of Jewish mysticism and the argumentative gestures of talmud as these come to him through Yiddish literature from the East, as well as his attraction to Lao-Tze.

In general, his relation to his literary past is marked neither by anxiety nor querulousness—nor by excessive playfulness. He is, first of all, prone to be awed by a consciousness of the specialness of his gift: “The tremendous world that I have in my head. But how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces.”¹¹ He describes a persona of himself: “All that he does seems to him, it is true, extraordinarily new, but also, because of the incredible spate of new things, extraordinarily amateurish” (*Great Wall* 263-64). Kafka is eager to discover in other writers comparable passions. He searches not so much for mastery and guidance as something sharable in them, upon which his own nightmares can be reflected. He is strengthened by the consciousness that others have suffered even more than he for the same great cause. It is wonderful when another’s strangeness can be less strange than he is to himself. The danger is not so much that other writers prove more massively truthful than he as that they might be trivial, bad, or irrelevant—and he is once again condemned to selfhood. He is less bent on fighting off the supposed knowledge that the great hold on humanity of canonical writers excludes him—robs him of his right to “settle”—than he is anxious to greet the spirit of other writers to whom he might raise a flag, like Robinson, considering them terra firma and in principle a harbor for his wandering bark. The claim of Deleuze and Guattari that Kafka is a deterritorializer of the territorializations of the cultural masters who oppress him flows from a contemporary paranoia insensitive to the finer shades of Kafka’s literary schizophrenia, which is to say, to the “monstrosity” he called literature.

NOTES

¹Adorno 130. This is the crux. The point would be not to begin with the idiom but to think through the idiom.

²Some of the most relevant pages from the English translation have been reprinted in the anthology edited by Mark Anderson.

³Brod, *Streitbares Leben* 219. Cited, along with other valuable materials, in Trost (35). Emery Snyder put me on the track of this article.

⁴See Baioni, Robertson, Jofen, and Robin. For an overview of this material, see Bruce.

⁵Deleuze and Guattari defend the idea of a so-called “minor literature” (*littérature mineure*). This concept, which they apply to Kafka’s work, appears on their account to derive from Kafka’s explicit analysis of just such a literature. There is some usefulness to their idea, but its application to Kafka’s work as a whole is tendentious, and the claim that it derives from Kafka’s own reflections on his writing goals is unjustified. The concept of “minor literature,” especially as “revolutionary literature”—Deleuze and Guattari write that “there is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor” (26)—is essentially their invention.

Kafka’s sources, for Deleuze and Guattari, consist of letters and diary entries that Kafka wrote at widely different times. The earliest are three closely linked diary entries on “small literatures” which Kafka began writing on December 25, 1911. The first entry has no heading, the second is headed “Continuation,” the third, “Character Sketch” (*Diaries 1910-13* 191; *Tagebücher* 312-15, 321-22; I have made a number of small changes to this translation). In these entries Kafka does not stress, à la Deleuze and Guattari, the distinction between “major” and “minor” in the strict sense. What he does refer to is a “literature whose development is not in actual fact unusually broad in scope” (*Litteratur . . . die sich in eine tatsächlich zwar nicht ungewöhnlichen Breite entwickelt*) (*Diaries 1910-13* 192; *Tagebücher* 313-14); “a small nation’s memory” (*das Gedächtnis einer kleinen Nation*) and “the national consciousness of a small people” (*das Nationalbewußtsein innerhalb eines kleinen Volkes*) (*Diaries 1910-13* 193; *Tagebücher* 315). In the “Continuation” the literature of small nations is implicitly opposed to “great literatures” (*große Litteraturen*); and the “Character Sketch,” too, speaks of “small literatures” (*kleine Litteraturen*). Something of the interdependence and confrontational tension in the English terms major/minor, the effort of the minor to usurp the major, is not present in Kafka’s usage “great/small.”

⁶“What do you say to the terrible things going on in our house?” Kafka is reported to have said to Professor Thieberger à propos of “The Metamorphosis” (Urzidil 11). But Kafka is also supposed to have said that if this were a faithful portrait, then Father would have to sleep in the toilet. (Thus “one man fights at Marathon, the other in the dining room”! [*Letters to Milena* 174].)

⁷There is furthermore the sense that Kafka as a writer rivals the author of the Old Testament when Kafka thinks of his characters (and indeed of himself) as prophets. See Pasley.

⁸“All such writing [his writing] is an assault on the frontiers; if Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah.”

⁹An ecological reverence hard to find in the postmodern scene.

¹⁰For an excellent discussion, see Jennings.

¹¹“And a thousand times rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me” (*Diaries 1910-13* 288).

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