Franz Kafka
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Relations between the neighboring domains of literary scholarship and cultural studies have sometimes been less than cordial. In his speech of thanks for the Bavarian Grand Prize for Literature, for example, the eminent German literary critic Karl Heinz Bohrer (2005) fought to defend his “fatherland” (literary scholarship) against the barbaric nomads of today (cultural studies). I would like to take three of his statements as a point of departure for the following reflections. First, culture is always the outward form an age gives to its shared thought, action, and arts; it is a form of knowledge corresponding to a social norm. Literature, on the other hand, like painting and music, always refers to some incommensurable event, an anti-normative phenomenon. If I want to understand the art of a piece of art, Bohrer contends, I may not make use of the historical category of culture. Second, the reality displayed in the language of literature is ominous, and its referentiality needs to be questioned. Third, from these considerations results the a priori assumption of any literary scholarship worth its name—that is to say, the absolute and fundamental difference between history and reality on the one hand, and literature on the other (Bohrer 2005, 20).

In what follows I would like to question the severe alternative Bohrer offers literary scholarship: either the variety stage of cultural forms devoid of any true artistic value or the position adopted by the true aesthete, sitting in a rocking chair and gazing out of the window, hands in trouser
pockets, a bottle of wine on the table. I shall look at the cultural form of modern propaganda, the historical event of World War I, and the narrative strategy in Kafka’s Chinese stories of spring 1917, in order to demonstrate the intricate nexus between the “reality displayed,” or rather hidden, in these stories, and the ominous referentiality of Kafka’s poetic language. I shall argue, in other words, that the origin and the law of the “anti-normative” quality of Kafka’s narratives are only conceivable through close analysis of precisely those cultural forms and historical events that surround them.

Admittedly, mentioning the war seems to be the weakest possible foundation for any such claim. If we consult the currently available handbooks in German on the literature of war, we do not find a single reference to Kafka. This scholarly finding is of course immediately confirmed by one of the main sources for Kafka scholarship, namely Kafka’s own diary. On July 31, 1914, the first day of the global catastrophe, we read (over and over again): “Ich habe keine Zeit. Es ist allgemeine Mobilisierung. K. und P. sind einberufen. . . . Nachmittag werde ich in der Fabrik sein müssen. . . . Aber schreiben werde ich trotz alledem, unbedingt, es ist mein Kampf um die Selbsterhaltung” (KKAT, 543) (“I have no time. General mobilization. K. and P. have been called up. . . . [So] I shall have to spend my afternoons in the factory. . . . But I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation” [Kafka 1964, 300]). And again, six days later: “Der Sinn für die Darstellung meines traumhaften inneren Lebens hat alles andere ins Nebensächliche gerückt und es ist in einer schrecklichen Weise verkümmert und hört nicht auf zu verkümmern” (KKAT, 546) (“My talent for portraying my dreamlike inner life has thrust all other matters into the background; they have dwindled dreadfully, nor will they cease to dwindle” [Kafka 1964, 302]). Could there be a clearer assertion of Bohrer’s scholarly a priori, the irredeemable disjunction of history and literature? Could Kafka have expressed his indifference toward all things military more obviously than in his entry of August 2: “Deutschland hat Russland den Krieg erklärt.—Nachmittag Schwimmschule” (KKAT, 543) (“Germany has declared war on Russia.—Swimming in the afternoon” [Kafka 1964, 301])? But wait: here, in fact, we may just have found a nice example of that “ominous referentiality” about which Bohrer warns us. A sufficient quantity and quality of wine provided, it will occur to us that in Kafka’s notebooks “swimming” is a prominent cipher for the condition of the writer, a model image connecting an existential situation (swimming as opposed to drowning)² to a publicly acclaimed skill or ability (competitive swim-
hing for a world record). So let us see if we can find out more about this ominous referentiality that links the war to the swimming school.

The beginning of the First World War, that “seminal catastrophe” (Kennan 1979, 3) of the twentieth century, also marks a turning point in the history of language and narrative. In the German-Austrian Augusterlebnis (“August experience”) of 1914, the poets’ yearning for a reunion of language and life—as expressed so beautifully in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s A Letter (a fictional letter, purportedly addressed to Philip Lord Chandos)—had been fulfilled, albeit in a doubly paradoxical way. First, the supposedly unreflecting, immediate experience of collective enthusiasm was in fact generated by an unparalleled, concerted effort of mass organization and the mass media. Referring to a public proclamation of war that he observed from his window, Kafka notes in his diary on August 6, “Organisiert war es gut. Es soll sich jeden Abend wiederholen, morgen Sonntag zweimal” (KKAT, 546) (“It was well organized. It is to be repeated every evening, twice tomorrow and on Sunday” [Kafka 1964, 302]). Second, the enhanced life described in the general narrative of the Augusterlebnis is always sacrificed life, the poetic cipher for the beginning of industrialized mass killing. This was the hour for the poets and intellectuals to proclaim what Gustav Roethe, a professor of German literature in Berlin, called “the immense experience [das ungeheure Erlebnis] that binds us together, purifies and elevates us” (1914, 18). Thus, Erlebnis, that child of fin-de-siècle German philosophy, with its triple narrative potential—embracing the biography of the individual, the collective social experience, and the higher plane of world history (see Horn 2000, 131)—had been summoned to report for active duty. In that summer of 1914, no one seemed to mind the gap between culture and artistic expression, Bohrer’s a priori of literary scholarship. Of course, considered as a turning point in the history of public speech, the Augusterlebnis had not come out of the blue. As Friedrich Kittler has pointed out, the three German “wars of unification” between 1863 and 1870 had already posed a serious problem for the iconography of war: “Telegram networks, military build-up plans, recruitment statistics, and ballistic tables—none of these would yield pictures any more. Their only reality is numbers. Yet mass armies could not be recruited with naked numbers alone. Hence a new politics of images was part of the new strategy of national wars” (2000, i).
Two further points need to be added. First, the challenge (the lack of immediate, manifest significance in technology and positive knowledge) was not restricted to the military field; second, the response (the production of new levels or layers of evidence) was not restricted to the visual media but applied to verbal imagery as well. In his anti-capitalist and anti-Semitic pamphlet, *Das Gesetz des Nomadentum und die heutige Judenherrschaft* ("The law of the nomad and today’s reign of the Jews"), for example, the Viennese Orientalist Adolf Wahrmund offered a reading of history as an eternal conflict between two human types: the sedentary, culturally productive Aryan, and the nomadic, destructive Semite, who made a living out of raiding Aryan culture (1919). In order to justify his reductionist model, Wahrmund called for the creation of a visual form of historiography to counteract “meaningless” positivism and statistics. What was needed in order to understand history was not theory and the systematic organization of evidence; rather, only “real, which is to say natural powers of life should be looked at” ("ins Auge gefaßt werden"), the “eternal key figures of historical events” who could resist the technological-Semitic “collapse of culture” (“Kultursturz”) (Wahrmund 1919, 4).

Clearly, Western society’s current habit of invoking a “clash of cultures” as a remedy for the imminent “collapse of culture” (i.e., the practice of externalizing an immanent threat to one’s way of life) is deeply rooted in modern metahistory. As Hegelian philosophy began to disintegrate, cultural types, freed from the treadmill of the dialectic, spread out across a variety of discourses, including those of scholarship, journalism, and propaganda. The application of typology could be located anywhere on a scale between two epistemic poles, an essentialist one, allegedly connected to depth and transcendental truth, and a cognitive one, connected to surface and positive knowledge. Wahrmund’s Aryan-Semitic dichotomy obviously represents an extreme version of the essentialist option, with its discursive claim to penetrate the appearance of historical phenomena and grasp their essence. In the aftermath of the two world wars, conservative German historians argued that types of the second (cognitive) kind had to be distinguished clearly from such essentialist terminology. Types were to be considered as “approximative or accidental terms, approaching the essence of their historical object asymptotically . . . and naturally open to changes, additions, and amendments, not as to their form, but as to their content, creating space for a conflict of opinions from which the truly typical traits would then emerge” (Zittel 1967, 128; my translation). Seen thus, types functioned as cultural protocols for historical processes and events. While the recording or filing function of the
accidental type was opposed to the expressive function of the essentialist type, it is precisely the paradoxical interplay of these two functions that created the remarkable discursive appeal of typology and brought about the typically German fascination with types.

In the summer of 1914, in a series of state-sponsored talks given in Berlin and distributed widely in cheap pamphlets (Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1914), German professors contributed to the new politics of imagery by providing it with a set of pseudo-scholarly narratives that served as an enhancing cultural frame. For example, the political economist Werner Sombart (Max Weber’s most notable scholarly opponent in the pre-war period) updated essentialist typology for military deployment. In Sombart’s narrative, presented in a pamphlet published in 1915 and entitled Händler und Helden (“Traders and heroes”), world history is dominated by the conflict between traders (typically British) and heroes (typically Germans). Whereas the trader strives for a secure and comfortable life, a life they control by calculation, Sombart’s hero “wants to give, he wants to waste himself, to sacrifice himself” (1915, 64) to call attention to the state at war and its life-devouring military machine. “Do people have a clue,” exclaimed Karl Kraus, the foremost critic of this murderous typology, “about the kind of life to which the press gives expression? A life that has long since been the imprint [Ausdruck] of this very press” (1988, 16). In the face of an all-embracing war journalism that was capable of “transforming printer’s ink into blood” (1988, 18), Kraus chose to turn to silence—albeit in his own paradoxical way, by proclaiming his famous anti-war tirade to be an inevitable commentary that distinguished his silence from tacit agreement.6

Kafka’s famous remark of 1922—“mauscheln wie Kraus kann niemand” (Kafka 1975, 336) (“No one can ‘mauscheln’ like Kraus” [Kafka 1978, 288])—represents a case of extreme modesty. In response to the challenge of war propaganda, Kafka too, just like Kraus, falls back on mauscheln, an untranslatable term for the anti-Semitic notion that there exists a typically Jewish, or rather Yiddish, modus loquendi, allegedly a fraudulent language that combined vivid gesticulation with hidden meaning. Unlike Kraus, however, Kafka creates a narrative voice that conceals even the traces of its own mauscheln, thereby combining silence with utmost eloquence.

II

In the spring of 1917, when the multi-ethnic Hapsburg Empire believed itself to be surrounded by an alliance of foreign and barbaric enemies
while facing, on the domestic front, the choice between returning to authoritarian centralism or being swept away by the strong and multiple movements toward national independence in its constituent territories, Kafka was invited to join an artists’ association for “Greater Austria.” He declined the invitation on the grounds that he was “nicht imstande, mir ein im Geiste irgendwie einheitliches Groß-Österreich klarzumachen und noch weniger allerdings, mich diesem Geistigen ganz eingefügt zu denken, vor einer solchen Entscheidung schrecke ich zurück” (KKANI, 336) (“incapable of envisaging a homogeneous Greater Austria and even less capable of imagining myself completely integrated into that spiritual whole; from such a decision I shrink back”) (my translation). This rejection implies the initiating factor in all of Kafka’s writings: an assignment.

On the very next page of his notebook Kafka sets out to write down two stories about the Chinese empire. The first and longer fragment, “Building the Great Wall of China,” reflects the interplay between national defense against barbarous nomads on the one hand and the domestic issue of the administrative and imaginary organization of political leadership and unity on the other. While the story’s first sentence—“Die chinesische Mauer ist an ihrer nördlichsten Stelle beendet worden” (KKANI, 337) (“The Great Wall of China was finished at its most northerly point” [KSS, 113; translation modified])—seems to proclaim the completion of the defensive wall, it soon becomes clear that, as the Chinese master of torture in Octave Mirbeau’s novel Torture Garden had whispered in Kafka’s ear, “Something is rotten in the state of China” (1997, 152). The flaw lies in the system of partial construction that leaves wide gaps in the wall and creates doubts about the accountability of the Chinese High Command. By the end of the account, however, these very doubts, together with the manifold representations of the Emperor himself in the various provinces and villages, are acknowledged precisely to be the foundation of the Empire’s political constitution. The second fragment, “A Page from an Old Document,” proves this conclusion wrong, however, as it describes the situation after the failure of national defense, when the capital has been invaded by the nomads while the Emperor looks on helplessly. The diegetic frame (the document is alleged to be a fragment of an old manuscript damaged by fire) seems to place it in the historical past of the first account.

At first glance, we are dealing here with a neat historical analogy linking China with Austria, wrapped up in a literary image. On the one hand, Kafka’s Chinese account corresponds with the facts of Chinese history in its key elements and even in many striking details. The first long narrative could be located around 1435 when, at the cultural peak
of the Ming Dynasty, the Great Wall was completed. The second account could be connected to the nomad invasion in the thirteenth century when the Chinese capital of Nanking, unlike Beijing in later centuries, was still located far from the border, as an important detail of the shoemaker’s account has it. On the other hand, Austria enters the picture via a letter in which Talleyrand, after the battle of Austerlitz, reminded Napoleon that “the Hapsburg monarchy is an accumulation of states fitting together badly, completely different in language, customs, creed, and constitution, which only have in common the person of their Emperor. Such a power cannot but be weak; but it is a suitable bulwark against the barbarians—and a necessary one” (Cooper, 186). This image of the “necessary bulwark” against the barbaric Slavs was of course revitalized in German-Austrian war propaganda time and time again.

Yet the correlation between Kafka’s China and the Austria of 1917 cannot simply be reduced to the semiotic scale, to the mere analogy between two Empires on the verge of being invaded. Rather, it needs to be located and analyzed on a pragmatic level, namely as Kafka’s reaction to and intervention in political discourse by the aesthetic means of narration. Allow me to unfold this hypothesis in three steps.

If we look at the diegetic frame of Kafka’s narrative, we note that his narrated world stands in close proximity to the typological thinking of his day. In nineteenth-century typology, “China” was used as shorthand for the cultural condition that the German conservative sociologist Arnold Gehlen was later to term “crystallized” in his critique of the administrative social state on both sides of the iron curtain (1962, 311–28). In Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of History, the crystallized culture of the Chinese—a system of strictly top-down administrative and intra-family hierarchies and the complete absence of subjective inwardness and responsibility—represented the cultural other of a dynamic and progressive Western culture based on individual responsibility and reason. It was only later in the nineteenth century, in Nietzsche’s criticism of Western culture and the Bismarckian welfare state, that the possibility of filing the case of Europe itself under the rubric of “Chinese affairs” was first discussed at some length. In The Gay Science, Nietzsche wrote, “Socialists and the state idolaters of Europe, with their measures for making life better and safer, could easily establish Chinese conditions and Chinese ‘happiness’ in Europe too, if only they could first extirpate the sicklier, more tender, more feminine dissatisfaction and romanticism that are still superabundant here at present” (2001, sec. 1, 25). In the first version of his Protestant Ethic (1904), even Max Weber spoke of the “‘Chinese’ pet-
rifaction” of modern culture; in the revised edition, published after the end of World War I, this regressive use of typology was wisely changed to “mechanical petrifaction” (1996, 154, 202; my translation). In Wahrmund’s anti-Semitic pamphlet, it is the “petrified” Semitic culture that threatens to undo Europe’s efforts to tear itself away from the influence of Asia during the classical age. Conversely, Martin Buber, one of the founding fathers of “cultural Zionism,” with its center in Prague, contends that only Oriental culture is capable of granting unity and unquestionable meaning, of creating those “metaphors of the nameless” (1963b, 56; my translation) that would be able to reconcile what Buber called the “Asian crisis” (1963b, 64) of the age, its lack of a unifying myth, as craved by the artists’ association of “Greater Austria” that Kafka declined to join. In Buber’s Zionist cultural script, it is precisely and exclusively “the Jew” to whom this mission must be assigned, since he alone had always “remained an oriental” (1963b, 62).

Kafka certainly knew the cultural “China” file to the extent that it is displayed here, and far beyond. When he started writing about China at the turning point of the First World War, however, he not only imitated a complex semiotic structure but also inscribed his writing into a series of pragmatic speech acts. In the years following the constitutional crisis of 1848, when the unity of the Hapsburg Empire was threatened by the desire of its various peoples for self-determination, Karel Havlíček Borovský, a founding father of the Czech political press, was exiled to Tyrol. From there he wrote, in the guise of a foreign correspondent, critical reports about the domestic affairs of Ireland and China, reports that could be related approximately or accidentally to the Hapsburg Empire. Withdrawing to a setting in order to reflect critically on the present need not, however, simply be a reaction to repression and censorship. It can also be an active move to create space for contemplation in the face of overwhelming events. Kafka’s Chinese reflections also participate in the tradition of this other gesture, as instanced most notably by Nietzsche’s retrospective foreword to The Birth of Tragedy: “As the thunder of the Battle of Wörth rolled across Europe, the brooder and lover of riddles who fathered the book was sitting in some corner of the Alps . . . writing down his thoughts about the Greeks . . . ” (1999, 3). Kafka, in turn, as the first and foremost among those readers Nietzsche had been craving all his life,9 found the precise formula for his sidestep to Asia in the opening section of the fourth Unfashionable Observation, where Nietzsche invokes the example of Alexander the Great to characterize the Wagnerian perspective on contemporary culture: “We know that in moments
of extraordinary danger or when making important decisions about their lives, people compress all their experiences in an infinitely accelerated process of introspection and are able to perceive once again with uncommon sharpness the nearest and the most distant things. What might Alexander the Great have seen in that moment in which he had Europe and Asia drink from one and the same cup?” (1995, 262).

Shifting focus from the diegetic frame to the narrative instance, we can now establish that the latter, in terms of contemporary cultural typology, truly is Chinese. “The Chinese,” Hegel writes in his Lectures on the Philosophy of History, “have as a general characteristic a remarkable skill in imitation, which is exercised not merely in daily life, but also in art” (1900, 144). Right from its first breath, in other words, Kafka’s Chinese voice is infected with literacy. Not only does it produce nothing but imitations but it emerges from an act of imitation itself, appearing simply to echo Hegel’s Chinese typology, including its subsequent changes, additions, and emendations. This narrative voice keeps oscillating between the nearest and the most distant things, as Nietzsche put it, tensed as it is between inwardness and identity on the one hand, and exteriority and multiplicity on the other. Accordingly, the narrator of the “Great Wall” fragment is at once in the position of a detached observer of the defense venture and involved in it (as a subordinate leader). He thus operates on both sides of the distinction between a heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic narrator, while the diegetic world is at once a “narrated world” and a “discussed world.” As we are discussing a story by Franz Kafka, this narratological distinction, or rather indecision, between detachment and involvement already occurs on the level of the narrative itself. Thus, the Chinese narrator repeats the movement of his Bohemian author when he stresses that “Meine Untersuchung ist doch nur eine historische, aus den längst verflogenen Gewitterwolken zuckt kein Blitz mehr” (KKANI, 346) (“my investigation is purely historical; lightning no longer flashes from the long since vanished thunderclouds” [KSS, 117; translation modified]). At the same time, the narrative structure that creates this peculiar indecision, which is to say a rudimentary matrix narrative bringing forth an extended and complex, multi-level hyponarrative, is a defining feature of the multifarious reports on safety measures Kafka, the insurance clerk, had to write for the Austrian authorities. Here, too, the genre requires the reporter’s detachment from the content of the report, while official responsibility grants continuous involvement. The specific difference between those Bohemian reports and the Chinese report lies in the fact that in the latter case the matrix narrative does not precede the
report, but is embedded in it, thus confronting the reader with an uninialized hyponarrative. At both levels of writing, the detached style of the report may be interrupted by quoted statements of actors involved in the field. Within Kafka’s office writings, his long report on “Umfang der Versicherungspflicht der Baugewerbe und baulichen Nebengewerbe” (Kafka 2004, 54–69, 70–73) (“the Scope of Compulsory Insurance for the Building Trades” [Kafka 2009, 54–73]) represents a vivid example of just such an orchestration of voices by the insertion of third-degree narratives.11 In the same vein, his Chinese narrator eschews the perspective of Erlebnis (“experience”) in favor of the perspective of historical events but easily shifts to the opposite mode of expression when he quotes the rhetoric and spirit of the Augurterlebnis in the following description of the building operations: “jeder Landsmann war ein Bruder, für den man eine Schutzmauer baute. . . . Einheit! Einheit! Brust an Brust, ein Reigen des Volkes, Blut, nicht mehr eingesperrt im kärglichen Kreislauf des Körpers, sondern süß rollend und doch wiederkehrend durch das unendliche China” (KKANI, 342) (“Every fellow countryman was a brother for whom one was building a wall of protection. . . . Unity! unity! breast on breast, a round dance of the people, blood, no longer locked up in the cramped circulation of the body but rolling sweetly and yet returning through the infinity of China” [KSS, 115; translation modified]).

This oscillation between involvement and detachment, this amalgamation of the nearest and the most distant things, becomes even more crucial when we try to get to know the narrator. His peculiar double qualification as an expert on nomad prevention and vergleichende Völkergeschichte” (KKANI, 48) (“comparative ethnography” [KSS, 118]) betrays a certain kinship with Kafka, the Bohemian expert on accident prevention and writer of stories about China whose confessed desire was to “die ganze Menschen- und Tiergemeinschaft zu überblicken, ihre grundlegenden Vorlieben, Wünsche, sittlichen Ideale zu erkennen, sie auf einfache Vorschriften zurückzuführen” (Br, 755) (“know the entire human and animal community, to recognize their fundamental preferences, desires, and moral ideas, to reduce them to simple rules” [Kafka 1974, 545]). It is a kinship, though, that is less a case of personal similarities than of common skills, despite a number of correspondences in educational and career matters. Any Kafka scholar interested in narratology would do well to listen closely the Chinese narrator’s clue that “es gibt bestimmte Fragen denen man nur mit diesem Mittel gewissermaßen an den Nerv herankommt” (KKANI, 348) (“there are certain questions whose nub, so to speak, one can get to only by this method” [KSS, 118]),
namely by linking comparative ethnography (Kafka’s definition of his writing project) to issues of public safety.

The interplay between literature (on one side of Bohrer’s gap) and the Great War and industrial accident insurance (on the other) goes far beyond a number of random allusive references. In the wake of the excitement triggered by the Chernobyl disaster, it has been suggested that historians should adopt some of the methods of accident research in order to understand better the emergence and course of major armed conflicts. Kafka’s response, as it were, has been waiting patiently for this challenge to be made. A glance across to the “cultural” side of Bohrer’s gap to the desert of Kafka’s office writings, reveals that the narrative arrangement of his Chinese-nomadic typology owes a considerable debt to the discourse of accident prevention and accident insurance. In fact, we find the key problems of Kafka’s Chinese narrative prefigured in two speeches Kafka composed in 1913 as a ghostwriter for his Institute’s presentation at the Second International Congress for Rescue Service and Accident Prevention in Vienna (see Kafka 2004, 860.). To begin with, the difference between a complete defense wall and the inexpedient system of piecemeal construction points to the distinction between accident prevention in the German Reich and in Austria, whereas in Germany the organization of accident insurance by trade associations (specific branches of production) permitted a systematic method of accident prevention: “[war] die territoriale Organisation [in Österreich] . . . viel zu umfassend . . . um mit der Unfallverhütung zweckmäßig verbunden zu werden” (Kafka 2004, 278) (“the territorial organization [in Austria] was much too broad . . . to be coupled with accident prevention in a purposeful way” [Kafka 2009, 269]). This led to the very system of piecemeal construction on which the narrator comments: “Aber der Teilbau war nur ein Notbehelf und unzweckmäßig. Bleibt also nur die Folgerung, dass die Führerschaft etwas Unzweckmäßiges wollte. Sonderbare Folgerung, gewiß” (KKANI, 345) (“But partial construction was only a makeshift and unsuited to its purpose. The conclusion that remains is that the leaders wanted something unsuited to its purpose. An odd conclusion, certainly” [KSS, 117]). The first Vienna speech on Bohemian accident prevention also anticipates the strategic crux of the Chinese construction project—adapting the construction of the wall not only to the continuous development of building technology but also to the nomads’ permanent shifting from place to place: “die Unfallverhütung [ist] in fortwährender Umbildung begriffen . . . da sie einerseits der Entwicklung der Industrie und Maschinentecnhik, andererseits jener der Unfallverhütungstechnik
folgen soll” (Kafka 2004, 277) (“accident prevention is in the process of continuous reformulation, since it must follow both the development of industry and machine technology as well as the developments of accident prevention technology” [Kafka 2009, 251]). Like the Chinese in Kafka’s story, his expert colleagues on accident insurance in Prague were well aware of the fact that they could learn from the accidents/nomad movements how best to organize their defense against them. In 1916 Alois Gütling, the head statistician of the Prague institute, with whom Kafka shared an office, suggested applying Charles Frederick Taylor’s *Principles of Scientific Management* to accident prevention. By breaking down the process of production into its most basic steps, it would soon be possible to establish statistically the precise accident risk of every single movement made by an individual worker (Gütling 1916, 189). As contemporary war reporting on the strategy of battlefront development was organized according to the same basic conflict—between a defense effort that followed a spatial logic and an enemy whose movements in space seemed to be incalculable—Kafka’s Chinese-nomad scenario offers its readers a space for an interdisciplinary dialogue on accidents in industry and history.

The presence of extra-literary forms and procedures at the very center of the aesthetic becomes even more undeniable when we look at the overall arrangement of narrative voices. Like his office writings, Kafka’s “Chinese protocols” depend on a narrative source that brings forth a variety of voices, among which the voice of the expert does not claim privileged credibility or authority, thereby exposing the void space of a metanarrative instance, or rather, the metanarrative instance as a void space. Thus, the Chinese architect cites a number of legends from Chinese folk wisdom, thereby insisting on the superiority of public opinion over the scholarly knowledge of historians and finally underlining the fact that it is precisely the polyphonic constitution of imaginary unity that is the foundation of the Chinese Empire. Yet there is a most significant multi-vocality at work here that transgresses even the diegetic frame of the architect’s report. When Kafka abandoned his first Chinese fragment, the next thing he wrote was the first few lines of the story about a trader who prematurely shuts down his shop in the afternoon out of disgust at his business (KKANI, 357). On the very next page of Kafka’s notebook we witness the opening of another story and another shop: “Ich habe eine Schusterwerkstatt auf dem Platz vor dem kaiserlichen Palast. Kaum öffne ich in der Morgendämmerung meinen Laden, sehe ich schon die Eingänge aller hier einlaufenden Gassen von Bewaffneten besetzt. Es sind . . . offenbar Nomaden aus dem Norden” (KKANI, 358)
(“I have a shoemaker’s shop on the square in front of the Imperial Palace. No sooner do I open my shop at dawn than I see armed men occupying the openings to all the streets that run into the square. . . . they are evidently nomads from the North” [KSS, 66]).

The connection between the architect’s report on nomad prevention and the shoemaker’s report on nomad invasion is much stronger than this. It goes far beyond the opposition between two strategic scenarios—a shop closed in the afternoon and a shop opened in the morning, “the most risky time of the day” (cf Vogl 1994, 745)—and far beyond the order of pages in Kafka’s notebook. In fact, Kafka has taken the interplay between the two irreconcilable narratives and voices (those of the architect and the shoemaker) straight from his downtown office at the Accident Insurance Institute up to his “shoemaker’s shop” to the Alchimistengasse (right in front of the Prague Royal Palace), where he wrote his after-hours protocols at that time. The two narrative perspectives on the nomad issue reflect precisely the two discourses on industrial accidents that collided almost day by day, week by week, on Kafka’s office desk. On the one hand, there is the discourse of the expert on accident prevention, speaking in the name of an institution, arguing from a wide angle and multiple perspectives with knowledge of technology and manpower management, conceiving the accident as an eventuality, a mere probability—a risk related to the life of a population. On the other hand, there is the discourse of the accident victim, with all the features of a typical incident report (Hergangsbericht) as prescribed by the official form for a compensation claim. In the latter case, an individual faces the post-accident situation with an unequipped mind, incapable of remembering the actual event—“Auf eine mir unbegreifliche Weise sind sie bis in die Hauptstadt gedrungen, die doch sehr weit von der Grenze entfernt ist” (KKANI, 358) (“In a manner incomprehensible to me, they have penetrated to the capital, although it lies a long way from the border” [KSS, 66])—and describes a fate as it relates to the life of an individual. Moreover, in the shoemaker’s account the Chinese architect’s Erlebnis scenario, the supposedly immense and elevating experience of a collective communio sanguinis, is inverted, for the imagined liberation of the blood actually comes about quite literally as a live ox is torn to pieces by the bloodthirsty nomads who congregate in the name of cruelty and havoc. What is more, the witness/victim not only finds himself abandoned by those responsible for nomad prevention but also finds that the third narrative dimension of the Erlebnis, the plane of world history, has been cancelled. As the Emperor watches the scene from his Palace
with his head bowed, unable to take action, all are abandoned, even by nomad insurance. The traders and craftsmen, following Sombart’s typoscript, establish an elementary mutual insurance scheme as a substitute for heroic state action by pooling their money to support the butcher whose free home delivery of raw meat to the nomads is intended to still their thirst for blood. Alas, this procedure has as much influence on the nomads as accident insurance has on the occurrence of accidents: “Bekämen die Nomaden kein Fleisch, wer weiß was ihnen zu tun einfiele, wer weiß allerdings, was ihnen einfallen wird, selbst wenn sie täglich Fleisch bekommen” (KKANI, 360) (“If the nomads were not to get meat, who knows what would occur to them to do; who knows, for that matter, what will occur to them even if they do get their daily meat” [KSS, 67]). There is neither an “event” nor decisive action in the endless leagues of China; it is a traders’ world devoid of those heroes who could turn this whole affair into what First World War propaganda would consider a proper narrative: “Uns Handwerkern und Geschäftsleuten ist die Ret tung des Vaterlandes anvertraut; wir sind aber einer solchen Aufgabe nicht gewachsen; haben uns doch auch nie gerühmt, dessen fähig zu sein. Ein Mißverständnis ist es und wir gehn daran zugrunde” (KKANI, 361) (“To us craftsmen and businessmen the salvation of the fatherland is entrusted; but we are not up to such a task; certainly we have never boasted of being capable of it. It is a misunderstanding, and it is driving us to our ruin” [KSS, 67]). This is how Kafka responds post festum, in the spring of 1917, to Sombart’s invocation of heroism at the outset of the war.

In his analysis of Kafka’s narrative voice, Joseph Vogl argues that the eventum tantum, the purely virtual event beyond empirical time with its linear flux, the event that has always happened already or has not happened yet, organizes the unique narrative space of Kafka’s stories (see Vogl 1994, 754). As I have just shown, the status of the accident in insurance discourse is marked precisely by this oscillation between prematurity and belatedness, between the “not yet” of accident prevention and the “no more” of the accident report. Thus, Kafka the poet and Kafka the clerk are obviously guilty of smuggling on a grand scale across Bohrer’s forbidden border. Yet this matter is even more scandalous, and even more complicated. The gap between Kafka’s narrators and the event they elaborate on, Vogl continues, opens up the impersonal space of a form of indirect speech, a discours indirect libre that sets the scene for an assemblage of voices, voices not emerging from subjects but in turn creating a fluid matrix for multiple subjectivities (1994, 755). In contrast to the intra-diegetic multi-vocality discussed so far—the voices reported by the
architect, his insistence on the Emperor’s manifold imaginary existence, the *différend* between the architect and the shoemaker—this other, glossolalic multi-vocality is radically transdiegetic, transtextual, or, rather, transmedial.

III

I believe that it is precisely at this apparently abstract point of my analysis that an assignment for philology comes into play. Kafka, as Vogl argues convincingly, developed his “fourth person” (1994, 747) narrative voice right from the start in his *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (*Description of a Struggle*) and “Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande” (“Wedding Preparations in the Country”). But it is only after the summer of 1914, when the *Erlebnis* of the first-person plural, the nationalist “We feeling” (*Wir-Gefühl*), makes its murderous presence felt, that Kafka begins to think about occupying strategically the unmarked space of the “fourth person.” In his stories from the First World War, Kafka deploys his “urge to imitate” (Kafka 1964, 157)—to build a literary machine that simultaneously copies and destroys the machinery of war propaganda. Thereafter, his narratives, word by word and scene by scene, down to their most incommensurable and incomprehensible passages, seem to consist of the rich prey of Kafka’s truly nomadic raids in writing.

To begin with a random example, the treacherous first sentence of this pseudo-foundational narrative (“The Great Wall of China was finished at its most northerly point” [KSS, 113; translation modified]) could well be seen as “inspired by” or “copied from” the first sentence of the preface to the proceedings of the Second International Congress for Rescue Service and Accident Prevention, which, in its Bohemian section, was so closely connected to the fragmentary organization of the Chinese security effort. The volume that made Kafka an international, if anonymous, author on insurance begins, “With the Second International Conference which took place between 9 and 13 September 1913 within the walls of the friendly Imperial Capital of Vienna, a great and significant work has been completed” (Charas 1914, iii). If we shift our focus onto the rhetoric of the fatherland and philosophical subtleties, such as the difference between mythological time and historical time, as in a speech titled “Social Welfare and the German Will to Victory” delivered by the president of the German Imperial Insurance Bureau, Paul Kaufmann, to the attentive staff of Kafka’s Prague agency, we find the following: “A
century ago patriotic men had confidently drawn attention to Germany’s eternal calling (Ewigkeitsberuf), which is to set the final stone on the obelisk of history” (Kaufmann 1915, 23). In the same fall, Kafka might have stumbled across the proclamation in Rudolf Kjellén’s geopolitical writings that the “final stone” was about to be added to another “building,” namely the German bridge between Berlin and the Orient, which was the providential project of the Baghdad Railway that Germans had been looking forward to so enthusiastically since the summer of 1914 (Kjellén 1916, 39; my translation). If you have a sensitive ear for the newsflash quality of Kafka’s famous opening sentence, you might hear yet another voice omnipresent in Kafka’s writings, the voice of Theodor Herzl, who advertised his project of a Jewish state to his sponsors as a “defense wall of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.” Later in his fantasy, Herzl went on: “Once the Jewish Company has been constituted the news will be carried in a single day to the remotest ends of the earth by the lightning speed of our telegraph wires. And immediate relief will ensue” (1943, 110). At this point, Kafka’s seemingly displaced Chinese fragment, “In diese Welt drang nun die Nachricht vom Mauerbau. Auch sie verspätet etwa dreiBig Jahre nach ihrer Verkündigung” (KKANI, 356) (“News of the building of the Wall now penetrated into this world. It, too, was delayed by some thirty years after its proclamation” [KSS, 123]), an announcement made by a boatman to the narrator’s incredulous father, seems to move more to the center of the narrative. But even if you are more interested in the contradictory potential of that opening sentence, you do not necessarily need to read on in Kafka’s story to uncover it. For its contradictions are already virulent in what seems to be its “source material.” In 1910, when he was getting more involved in Zionist issues, Kafka (and other readers of Herzl’s The Jewish State) were informed, as members of the audience allegedly listening entranced to Martin Buber’s Prague speeches on Jewry, that “the Jews have not even begun their work” (Buber 1963a, 17), since this work was not plain and simple nation-building but a brotherhood based on a community of blood. If we remember that Kafka is a writer by assignment, we only need to turn a few pages in Paul de Lagarde’s Deutsche Schriften (“German writings”) to find the gist of his response to the Writers’ Association for Greater Austria. “The church,” so de Lagarde asserts in his essay titled “The Religion of the Future,” “satisfied men’s minds for as long as it was under construction. Once it was completed, people left it. Should we not, then, find our satisfaction in building, since the centuries have shown us that the only thing humans can ever achieve is to begin
and to continue; when it comes to finishing things, they tire of the completed work and start all over again” (1891, 232; my translation).

IV

How are we to make use of this mess for narrative theory? Obviously, a “materialist” approach to text—as a montage of elements or a web of motives—would inevitably bring to light the business of a most bizarre “patch-up job,” a literature very much resembling the man inhabiting the present-day “Land of Culture” of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra:

Written all over with the signs of the past that are daubed over in turn with new signs: thus you have hidden yourselves well from all interpreters of signs!

...You seem to be baked from colours and out of scraps of paper glued together.

All ages and peoples gaze motley out of your veils; all customs and all beliefs speak motley out of your gestures.

He who tore away from you your veils and wraps and paint and gestures would have just enough left to frighten the birds. (Nietzsche 2003, 142)

This is precisely the “culturalist” scenario Bohrer warns against—and it would be hard to deny a certain similarity between Nietzsche’s Alexandrine “present day man” and the object of half a century of Kafka scholarship. Meanwhile, to be sure, post-structuralism has warned against assuming that there is a difficult recalcitrance in first-rate works of art, a resistance to understanding that calls for masterful interpretive reconstruction. But does that condemn us to leave the rich life of Kafka’s multivocality behind, to abandon it for the sake of the inexorably recurring insight into the impossibility of perfection, unity, and truth? Or could we hope to assume a case of “textual stubbornness” here, after all, a narration resisting our efforts to interpret the text and yet having a production within a larger purpose?

Shifting focus from “meaning” to “production,” we then would no longer reduce Kafka’s text to an organized set of signs representing this or that meaning or transcribing this or that source material. Beyond the stubborn imperfection of those signs, we would trace a set of signals evoking multitudes of voices, producing an indeterminacy that would aim to counteract the murderous determination implied in the propaganda-
based national identities of Kafka’s time. What creates the movement of this kind of literature is not the simple difference between a hypotext and a hypertext that “transforms” the hypotext (as suggested by Genette [1992, 15]) but rather the complex difference between the series of echo texts triggered by a matrix text—very much in the way that the manifold imaginings of the Emperor define the life of the Chinese people, while the Emperor himself, like the scripture, remains unalterable. While at any point the unalterable text of Kafka’s protocol may be used to introduce a temporary order into the chaos of echoes, the echoes will keep coming back and intensifying with each new reading of the protocol.

In the conceptual frame developed so far, we can describe this phenomenon as being yet another instance of Kafka the writer borrowing skills from Kafka the clerk, of a cultural skill becoming effective in the very heart of the aesthetic. At any given point in the syntagma of Kafka’s poetic protocols, his unique terminological shorthand, by its mere power of allusion (or “approximation”), “records” and “files” a paradigm of (often conflicting) expressive voices. By short-circuiting the essentialist and the approximative poles of German typological thinking, Kafka transforms propagandistic types from images of dissociation (designed to create a “them against us” plot) into images of association, thereby undermining their polemic potential. Hence the next step of my analysis—reaching far beyond the scope of this article—would require me to show in detail how, in the course of his Chinese reports, the Chinese-nomad constellation would simultaneously or intermittently “approximate” the threat that the Czechs represented to the Germans, the Germans to the Czechs, the Jews to the anti-Semites, the anti-Semites to the Jews, the so-called Ostjuden to the Westjuden, and, at the end of the day, the threat presented by any of the warring parties in the eyes of the other. 21 If we conceive of reading as a matter of multiple acts performed by multitudes (as suggested by Roland Barthes) rather than as the unique act of an individual, then Kafka, the eternal shipwreck and great swimmer, provides his contemporaries with a semiotic Noah’s Ark, offering, as the “larger purpose” postulated above, a common ground for any individual and any people precisely on the basis of their common habit of using polemics to distinguish themselves from one another.

V

Such “Kafkaian negotiations,” as we may summarize in the specific context of this volume, are by no means restricted to the level of “competing
representations” (Greenblatt 1990, 7) to the topical or figurative level of speech. As we have seen, they also comprise the level of narrative form and strategy. Even these apparently purely poetic features are informed (or, as Karl Heinz Bohrer or Jochen Vogt might prefer to say, infected) by non-literary discourses, such as administrative reports on legal and technological aspects of public insurance; and in turn, ever since the discursive event called “Kafka,” bureaucratic formats have been infected with the virus of multi-vocality. If literature, to conclude with another of the provocations Bohrer hurled into the face of his audience, is “too tall an order” (2005, 20) for today’s students, this is not because of its remoteness from the cultural context but because of literature’s rootedness in and its indebtedness to just such a context. This is the tall order I have in store for all readers of Kafka: instead of coming to know themselves by ceaselessly going over, word for word, the decrees of the Highest Leaders, or musing endlessly over the intentions and plans of the Emperor, I invite them to take the trajectory of the Chinese architect—that is, to explore the soul of all the provinces, to listen to the stories and legends of all the village-dwellers of all ages. For it is between these narratives that the immeasurable wealth and wisdom of Kafka’s leaderless Empire of letters can be found.

Notes

1. In other words, and on a larger scale, I am aiming to revise a new historicist approach to literary texts and cultural context by reconstructing such misty metaphors as the “circulation of social energy” and “negotiations” between text and context (Greenblatt 1990, 67), the specific writing strategies, techniques, and procedures a given author employs, and the specific set of documents processed by them.

2. See the “bachelor” fragment, posthumously “restored” by Max Brod (Kafka 1964, 25).


4. First published in 1887, Wahrmund’s book became an anti-Semitic “bestseller” when it was re-published after World War I.


6. “At this great time you may expect to hear from me no words of my own. None apart from these, which are still just about able to prevent silence from being misinterpreted” (Kraus 1988, 9; my translation).

7. This novel (Le Jardin des Supplices), first published in German in 1901 and immediately confiscated by the censor, challenges European civilization by comparing
it to excessive “Asian” cruelty. While it has been identified as a major source for Kafka’s 1914 story “In the Penal Colony” (see Zilcosky 2003, 110), its far-reaching echoes in his “Chinese voice” remain to be discovered.

8. After the war, Kafka made private use of the fade-over between Havlíček’s biography and his own. Long-exiled in a Tyrolean village in the spring of 1920, ink-wooing his Vienna based translator Milena Jesenská, and constantly suppressing the desire to board the next train to the capital, he instead book-travels to a Tibetan village, only to ink-sigh over its distance from Vienna, adding: “What I call foolish is the idea that Tibet is far away from Vienna. Would it really be far?” (Kafka 1953, 45).


10. For this distinction see Weinrich (2001).

11. For my terminology of narrative levels and a useful conversion of concepts developed by Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal, and others, see Jahn (2005).

12. See, for example, Jäckel’s reading of World War I as an “accident at the maximum limit of credibility” and his remark “it is astonishing that historians have never learned from accident experts. For both face the task, again and again, of clearing up catastrophes” (1996, 154; my translation).

13. “Those sections of the wall left abandoned in barren regions can easily be destroyed, over and over, by the nomads, especially since at that time these people, made anxious by the construction of the Wall, changed their dwelling places with incomprehensible rapidity, like locusts, and so perhaps had a better overview of the progress of the Wall than even we ourselves, its builders” (KSS, 113; translation modified).

14. For details, see Wagner (2009, 40–41).

15. Gerhard Neumann’s chapter in this volume focuses on this procedure. For its role in Kafka’s office writings, see Wagner (2003).

16. For the association of writing with the craft of a shoemaker, see Kafka’s diary entry of June 5, 1922, where he notes his “Talent für ‘Flickarbeit’” (KKAT, 922) (“talent for ‘botch work’” [Kafka 1964, 421]).

17. On the impact of accident forms on the narrative structure of Kafka’s stories, see Wagner (2006/2008).

18. For a sophisticated analysis of the status of the event in accident insurance, see Schäffner (2000).


20. For a similar use of the concept of “signal” in Joyce studies, see Topia (1984, 109).

21. For a detailed reconstruction, see Wagner (2006b).

22. In his epilogue to the (belated) German translation of Genette’s Discours du récit, Vogt argues that in the structuralist and poststructuralist decades (i.e., 1960–1990, roughly speaking) it was more difficult for a theory of literature based on the idea of aesthetic autonomy to cross the Rhine than to make the passage across the Atlantic. However, as we have seen, even at the level of form the aesthetic text is deeply indebted to its cultural context. Therefore, poetological analysis may very well (and actually needs to) make use of discourse analysis without falling guilty of downgrading literature to the level of mere “ideology or Ersatz philosophy” (Vogt 1998, 299).
Works Cited


Talleyrand-Périgord, Charles-Maurice de. Quoted in Münch 1949, 663.


