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THE ABANDONED WRITING DESK

ON KAFKA’S METANARRATIVES, AS EXEMPLIFIED BY “DER HEIZER”

Gerhard Neumann

Kafka’s writings focus particularly on something that he once called “den riskantesten Augenblick im Tag” (“the most risky moment of the day”). It is the focus of attention on the transition from sleep to waking, on the act of birth from the mother’s womb into the bosom of the family, and finally on the exit from the family and the entry into society. It is this last transition to which Karl Roßmann’s American uncle refers when he explains that “die ersten Tage eines Europäers in Amerika
[seien] einer Geburt vergleichbar” (KKAV, 56) (“the first days of a European in America are comparable to a birth”). Kafka’s story “The Stoker” likewise revolves around this act of birth into a strange society, around this most hazardous moment of the transition from the familiar to the alien. Adhering to the conventional structure of the novel of individual development, Kafka gives his story the traditional focus on the inception of a twofold career, stemming from a scenario of origins: there is, on the one hand, a beginning in sexual experience, and, on the other, in vocational life. But for such a career to get under way successfully, there needs to be—as I mentioned—an opening scene, a story that may be narrated as an origin and that generates from out of itself a continuing life-narrative. In the case of the protagonist of “The Stoker,” Karl Roßmann, it is an erotic episode that serves as a narrative of origin—no rarity in stories of individual development. It is the episode of Karl Roßmann’s being seduced by the cook, Johanna Brummer, a servant in his parents’ apartment. This scene of seduction is modeled on the mythical template of the Fall from Grace. Yet in stark contrast to the myth, it reveals itself to be the embarrassing failure of a scene of recognition between the sexes: a scene Karl is incapable of putting into narrative, since it involves too much shame and helpless incomprehension. After his metamorphosis, Gregor Samsa asks in comparable terms, “Was ist mit mir geschehen?” (KKAD, 115) (“What has happened to me?”); and it is said of Josef K. at the end of The Trial: “es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben” (KKAP, 312) (“it was as if his shame were destined to survive him”).

In no sense can Karl draw on support for his future career from the narration of this “primal scene.” Thus his situation is the opposite of that which occurs in many nineteenth-century novels, where a sexual initiation opens the portal to a process of maturity. Kafka’s story “The Stoker” tells of the crisis of the individual’s “second birth” into the world and then relates the problems that result from the fact that the scene of origin simply cannot be narrated. In this sense, Kafka conducts an experiment with the possibility or impossibility of beginnings that provide or do not provide the foundation for a life-narrative.

And yet if we cast only a cursory glance at Kafka’s story, we do get the impression that a life-narrative of this kind could readily be told in two short sentences. The novella begins as follows:

Als der siebzehnjährige Karl Roßmann, der von seinen armen Eltern nach Amerika geschickt worden war, weil ihn ein Dienstmädchen verführte
When, at the age of seventeen, Karl Roßman, who had been sent to America by his poor parents because a servant-girl had seduced him and borne a child as a result, sailed into New York harbour on board a ship that was gradually losing way, he suddenly saw the statue of the Goddess of Liberty, on which he had had his eyes for some time, as if in a flash of brighter sunlight. Her arm with the sword was raised aloft as before and the free breezes played about her figure. (KKAV, 7)

Here we find the blueprint for a whole life and the template for a career, such as one might find in any book. From this point the narrative could flow with perfect freedom, telling of the primal scene of the Fall from Grace, of the story of his sexual initiation (a story that he has brought with him to the New World of the virtual allegorizing of the scene from the perspective of guilt and punishment, discipline and justice—all in the radiance of an aura of destiny. But an interpretation of the text in this sense as the nucleus of a story with a quite predictable future development would be entirely misguided. As Karl is about to leave the ship, it turns out he has made two mistakes. He has forgotten his umbrella and he has also left behind the suitcase entrusted to him by his father. These two errors will deflect Karl from the straight and narrow path and lead him back into the labyrinthine belly of the ship. He wanders along corridors, hurries through an empty room “mit einem verlassenen Schreibtisch” (KKAV, 8) (“with an abandoned writing desk”)—a detail whose importance will become clear later—and ends up knocking on “eine beliebige kleine Türe” (KKAV, 8) (“a random little door”) behind which he meets the stoker, who—of course—gives the story its title. The adolescent boy and the man of mature years try to get to know each other and to communicate about their respective situations.

The stoker says he has just been dismissed from his job on account of some misdemeanors he is supposed to have committed, and he intends to complain about this to the captain. Karl has been compelled to emigrate to America, so they have both, in a sense, been sent into exile. But when the stoker inquires: “Warum haben Sie denn [nach Amerika] fahren müs-
“Why did you have to travel to America?” Karl refused to tell his story. Rather, the text tells us: “‘Ach was!’ sagte Karl und warf die ganze Geschichte mit der Hand weg” (KKAV, 12) (“‘Not worth mentioning!’ said Karl, and dismissed the whole story with a gesture”). To this the stoker replies, “Es wird schon einen Grund gehabt haben” (“Oh yes! There’ll have been a reason, all right”), and the narrator observes, “[daß man nicht recht wußte] ob [der Heizer] damit die Erzählung dieses Gründes fordernd oder abwehrend wolle” (KKAV, 12) (“that it was not clear whether the stoker wanted to demand this reason be revealed or prevent any disclosure of it”). By means of this ambiguity, the stoker (and through him the narrator) gives us a clue as to how the rest of the story might best be read. Our attention is meant to focus on the constant alternation of demands that, on the one hand, stories be told, and on the other hand, the rejection or refusal of narrative.

When Karl and the stoker finally end up in the Captain’s cabin, Karl tries in two ways to block the narration of his own story—for naturally he believes he has “thrown it away.” His first attempt is to present his passport to confirm his identity, but the purser reacts—as the text says—by flicking it away with two fingers, precisely as Karl had previously “flicked aside” his own life-story. Karl’s second strategy to avoid telling how he had been seduced consists in taking sides with the stoker, then usurping the other’s life-story and reciting it to the impatient gentlemen in the cabin. In order to achieve what we might term an indirect narration of himself, he vicariously tells the stoker’s story—with the secret desire of casting the tale of his own Fall from grace into oblivion: “Wenn ihn doch seine Eltern sehen könnten,” (“If only his parents could see him now”) the text runs “wie er im fremden Land vor angesehenen Persönlichkeiten das Gute verfocht” (KKAV, 33) (“fighting for the good in a foreign land before persons of repute”).

At this point the reader’s attention is drawn to the man with the bamboo cane, who has, up till now, been present in the cabin merely as an observer. He approaches Karl and asks—not once but twice—the question that implicitly demands the narration of his true life-story: “Wie heißen Sie denn eigentlich?” (KKAV, 31, 35) (“What is your real name?”) Through this exchange it slowly comes to light that the stranger is Karl’s rich American uncle. The cook, Johanna Brummer, who had seduced Karl, has written him a letter that arrived faster than the ship and informed him of Karl’s “love story.” The uncle has copied a summary description of Karl from the letter into his notebook and has now recognized Karl by comparing his appearance with the notes.
During this recognition scene—an anagnorisis in the drama of Karl’s quest for an identity—Karl for a second time resists narrating his story. For when, according to the account in the cook’s letter, the uncle sets about retelling the story of Karl’s seduction, Karl says quietly to himself “ich will nicht daß er es allen erzählt” (KKAV, 39) (“I do not want him to tell everyone”). This does not in the least prevent the uncle from doing precisely that, namely reciting the history of Karl’s seduction, announcing as he does so that he will later give his nephew the letter his seductress has written, so that he “den Brief, wenn er mag, in der Stille seines ihn schon erwartenenden Zimmers zur Belehrung lesen kann” (KKAV, 41) (“can read it for his edification in the quiet of the bedroom that has already been prepared for him”). Thus, Karl would be not once but twice the recipient of the story he himself refuses to tell at any price: in the version contained in the cook’s letter and also in his uncle’s recounting of that text “for his edification.”

At this moment during the “narrative” of the cook’s “narration” of his story, the dialogue-scene in the Captain’s cabin suddenly jumps— in the novella—into a kind of indirect speech that reflects Karl’s stream of consciousness:

Karl hatte aber keine Gefühle für jenes Mädchen. Im Gedränge einer immer mehr zurückgestoßenen Vergangenheit saß sie in ihrer Küche neben dem Küchenschrank, auf dessen Platte sie ihren Elbogen stützte. (KKAV, 41)

(But Karl felt nothing for that girl. In the crowded scenes of his past, that were being pushed ever further back, he saw her in her kitchen next to the kitchen-cupboard, with her elbows propped up on its marble top.)

It was this sequence and its indirect speech that, as early as 1914, delighted Robert Musil in his review of the story; Musil considered it a mode that one could scarcely designate as “narrative,” yet one that nonetheless gives voice to the dull murmur of experience. Karl’s indirect speech ends with the following words:

Weinend kam er endlich nach vielen Wiedersehenswünschen ihrerseits in sein Bett. Das war alles gewesen und doch verstand es der Onkel, daraus eine große Geschichte zu machen. (KKAV, 43)

(Weeping, Karl reached his own bed after receiving many assurances from
her that she wanted to see him again. That was all it had been, and yet the uncle was managing to make some great story out of it.)

Here the problem of the metanarrative that is Kafka’s central concern in “The Stoker” appears with the greatest clarity. The “big story” told by the uncle is superimposed on the *petit récit* that unfolds—without Karl’s grasping its significance—in the sequence of indirect speech. To borrow a term from Giorgio Agamben (2002), the “grandiose program” of literary narrative is played off against the dull, half-conscious murmuring of “naked life.”

When the audience fails to laugh at his uncle’s “big story” as Karl had feared—probably out of respect for the uncle’s dignified presence—Karl turns once again to the story of the stoker, which he had taken over once before at the beginning of the *novella*. He now tries to give the stoker a lesson—in, of all things, the correct and true way to recount life-stories. For in the meantime, the stoker—trying to tell his own sob-story to the Captain—has literally talked himself out of his job, by making what the text describes as a “trauriges Durcheinanderstrudeln” (KKAV, 27) (“pitiful mishmash”) of his own arguments. “Sie müssen das einfacher erzählen, klarer, der Herr Kapitän kann das nicht würdigen so wie Sie es ihm erzählen” (KKAV, 28) (“You must tell everything more simply, more clearly—the way you are telling it, the Captain cannot appreciate the facts”)—thus Karl’s admonition to the stoker at the beginning of the scene in the cabin. To this he adds, “Ordnen Sie doch Ihre Beschwerden, sagen Sie die Wichtigste zuerst und absteigend die andern. . . . Mir haben Sie es doch immer so klar dargestellt” (KKAV, 28) (“Put your complaints in an orderly manner, state what is most important first and then the rest in descending order. . . . You always put it so clearly to me”). Then, right at the end, when he takes leave of the stoker, Karl warns him again: “Du mußt Dich aber zur Wehr setzen, ja und nein sagen, sonst haben ja die Leute keine Ahnung von der Wahrheit” (KKAV, 49) (“But you must defend yourself, say yes or no—otherwise people will have no inkling of the truth”). Even when confronting his uncle, Karl assumes the manner of a teacher of rhetoric: “[abgesehen davon] sind in Deiner Rede einige Fehler enthalten gewesen, d.h. ich meine, es hat sich in Wirklichkeit nicht so zugetragen” (KKAV, 43) (“there were some errors in your account; that is, I am of the view that in reality not all of it occurred in that way”). Karl, who is incapable of narrating the originary scene of his own life-history and who—perhaps because of this—tries to suppress it, paradoxically
assumes the posture of instructor to his fellow narrators so as to conceal his inability to tell his own story.

II

Keeping in mind that this novella is at the same time the opening chapter of a novel, it seems to be Kafka’s intent to demonstrate the impossibility of narrating the one scene that is the inception of a developing life-story. The method he chooses is to intertwine narratives of narratives and observe their continual failures. Karl suppresses the story that marks the commencement of his exile and “throws it away.” But this suppressed story overtakes him on his voyage to America in the form of a letter written by his seductress, the cook, and is transformed by his uncle through the process of narration into a kind of text of recognition and test of identity—and thus turned into a “big story” (as Karl describes it) or “grand narrative” (as it might be described in literary theory). Karl’s muted consciousness then narrates the whole again to himself as a petit récit, as the murmuring of an almost inarticulate experience. Finally, Karl adopts a kind of alibi-narrative, namely the stoker’s story. Instead of attempting to make his own story credible according to the rules of “reasonable” narratives, he tries to infuse this alibi-narrative with credibility and to rehearse it as a cover-narrative of his own story, which cannot be told; we might say that the cover-narrative is the true narrative’s double. In this way Karl’s own erotic story is overlaid by that of the stoker’s career—painted over, as it were.

Here we confront Kafka’s unique narrative construct that has the following implications: the story of one and the same “experience” is conveyed from one narrative voice to another, and assumes in the process the qualities of a “suppressed,” “written,” “retold,” “withheld,” and “translated” narration. What remains a mystery is the vantage point from which this play of narrative and metanarrative, of telling and of telling-upon-telling is actually directed. For the “authorial” narrator, who occasionally flits through the text, remains a very weak presence. He has surrendered virtually all his authority to the characters who tell and retell the story. One indication of this specifically Kafkaesque metanarrative construct—that is, the absence of a dominant narrator—seems to me to be given by the detail I emphasized previously. When Karl, lost and disoriented, traverses the labyrinth of the empty ship looking for his umbrella, he passes a “verlassenen Schreibtisch” (KKAV, 8) (“abandoned writing desk”)
in an empty room. This clue points to the authorial narrator who has abandoned his place at the writing desk and thereby abandoned the individual characters to their own narrative fates—namely to those modes of telling that are transformed in their passage from one narrative voice to another—transmitted, translated, transnarrated—through the medium of the letter and the notes.

One is tempted to call this an extremely daring game with vicarious narration. It takes the form of the unstoppable telling of the stories of others. The cook vicariously narrates Karl’s story. Karl vicariously narrates the stoker’s story. The uncle, in turn, vicariously retells Karl’s story. These narratives are “recapitulations” and “overlays” that translate, correct, falsify, displace, magnify and reduce, but they do not reveal the nucleus that is the primal scene from which everything else proceeds. This must be left a mystery.

These narrative constructs, with whose conditions and possibilities the story experiments, seem to crystallize out of three distinct fields of discourse and their respective codes. First, there is the field of the authorial narrator—weakly contoured as he may be—who at no point engages in metafictional reflections about his own narrative. Second, there is the level of utterance by the characters who carry the story and who frequently indulge in vicarious narration. The text itself betrays an awareness of this. When Karl begins narrating the miserable tale of the stoker, taking it over from its “owner,” the reproach is made that the stoker has brought with him an “eingelernten Stimmführer” (KKAV, 24) (“pre-rehearsed mouthpiece”). But the characters in the text are not just vicarious narrators—they also assume the posture of critics and rectifiers, indeed almost of instructors, with regard to the narratives of other figures. Third, there is the mode of “indirect speech” as a narrative strategy, reflecting not only Karl’s half-awareness but also, at one point, that of the stoker. This strategy may be read as a move on the part of that authorial narrator who has cleared his desk, who has abandoned the responsibility for narrating the story and left it to the half-awareness of his characters—characters who can do no more than entrust themselves to what cannot be told, what is experienced dimly and with no transparency, whether this be the enigmatic seduction to which Karl falls victim—or else the wrong that the stoker has to suffer uncomprehendingly.

Kafka thus interweaves the narrative fields of the authorial narrator, of what the characters tell one another, and of indirect speech. I propose that we consider the complex intertwining of these three realms of narrative authority as a game with metanarrative strategies. If metalan-
guage is that second language which speaks about a first, then we could say metanarrative is that second narrative which overlays a prior one. In doing so it demonstrates the conditions that govern the possibility that “the telling of life-stories”—within a given historical and cultural situation—can be rendered intercommunicative (that is, achieved by mutual understanding). What makes Kafka’s text unique, I imagine, is that the game with different narratives is no longer played by the authorial narrator but that the latter smuggles interference into the narrative voice of the text—hence a game of retellings, of a narrative that doubles itself and allows what is told to be subverted by the very act of telling. So it is that we are no longer dealing with the self-reflection of an authorial narrator who thinks aloud about how and in precisely what narrative guise he is to present the story he has in mind—something Thomas Mann is fond of to the point of embarrassment. Rather, we must here be receptive to a voice that cuts across the process of narrative, harmonizing—as it were—with the utterances of one narrator after another but directed by no discernible, dominant narrative authority.

In this sense it is, perhaps, more accurate not to describe what is effected in Kafka’s prose as an overlaying of narrative processes but to see it rather as an oscillation and alternation within the narrative process itself. We might call it a vibration of the narrative thread, which—released from the control of the authorial narrator—has different narrative voices within the text align their frequencies with itself, or, better still, assigns to them in turn its own resonance. Kafka’s narrative strategy thus creates something like a free-floating tissue of narration, for which no one voice accepts lasting responsibility and which ultimately splits into several separate strands. It is almost as if Kafka intended to allow a freedom of space in which a story could narrate itself in several voices—a story that can by no means leap over the abyss between inarticulate life and the norms of discourse, between “naked life” and “sovereign law,” but still it “shows” that the gap is there. “The Stoker” is a novella which tells of what determines the possibility that, in a world of ironclad norms of discourse, it might once more be possible to establish narratives as a way of telling about lives.

III

Now, in these terms we should of course ask ourselves why Kafka, at first sight, seems to use such simple patterns of narration. There has long been
talk of Kafka’s “obstinate” manner of story-telling. And yet he develops such complicated patterns of narratives and of the doubling of narratives. Clearly, this complexity of narrative structures is related to the question of whether it is possible at all to relate the history of the “modern” subjectivity, which developed around 1900. If it is possible, how it might be done? For this unfortunate entity strives to find its proper place among three different codes that are mutually incompatible. First, there is the code of public existence, which is determined by politics and institutions (Habermas 1962); second, there is the code of private or familial existence, which is dictated by paternal authority; third, there is the code of intimacy (Luhmann 1982), which involves the basic improbability that emotions may be communicated between individuals and presupposes that the uniqueness of each individual is an inalienable quality. What faintest possibility might there be that any authorial agency should succeed in creating a unified narrative within the field of interplay between these three discrepant codes? How could the kernel of intimacy in any human life ever be articulated and transmitted in acts of narrative under such circumstances?

Storytelling, as Kafka sets out to illustrate in “The Stoker,” demonstrates that the task of narrating the event within the field of tension that exists between the withholding and forcing-out of the same story can simply not be performed. No code exists in which its “as suchness” can be expressed. There remains only the resort to interrogations and confessions. If the event of intimacy can be glimpsed at all, then it can be only in the gap that yawns between the law and “naked life.” The catch-22 situation in which narrative here has to try to sustain itself is the irresolvable, compulsive alternation between being interrogated—thus the uncle’s question, “Wie heißen Sie denn eigentlich” (KKAV, 31) (“What is your real name?”)—and being forced to an admission—thus Karl’s “ich will nicht daß er es allen erzählt” (KKAV, 39) (“I do not want him to tell it to everyone”). Lastly, there is the lapse into inarticulacy, which somehow finds its place in the gap between the other two. For Kafka there is no other mode of telling than a “narrative under condemnation.” Jacques Derrida’s formulation of this is memorable: the law with all its strategies of oppression invariably pre-exists narrative; but, contrariwise, the telling of a life in total exposure invariably precedes the law and can find no way of entering into it. Only in this gap between the two extremes can the trace of the narrative voice, passing from mouth to mouth, inscribe itself: sometimes as a corrective, sometimes as a retelling, sometimes vicariously.
On the basis of this insight, we might now make the attempt to show the literary status of the text “The Stoker” among varieties of narrative in a more precise manner. Is it a novella in its own right, or should we rather see it as the opening chapter of a novel? To all appearances Kafka has, in the opening scenes of this novel, put the problematic variations of literary narration to the test—and taken them to absurd lengths. Just as Karl’s route should lead straight from the ship into America’s open spaces but gets tangled right at the start and takes him back into the labyrinth of the ship’s belly, so the narrative traces, which should make tangible Karl’s originary narrative, as the seed from which his future will sprout, become knotted and confused. Just as the direct route takes him farther and farther into the labyrinth; just as the main portal becomes some random little door on which he chances to knock; just as—to draw a final analogy—the diretissima bifurcates into a rhizome, in all these ways syntagmatic narrative—at the very beginning of a novel, of all places!—suddenly flips into a kind of paradigmatic narration, into a perpetuum mobile of stories that bifurcate and overlay one another. One might venture to call such storytelling “stereometric.” In any event, it is overgrown with metanarratives. Storytelling that is vicarious and that constantly corrects itself becomes increasingly an interweaving of narrative acts, narrative repetitions, and their mutually critical interactions. But all this occurs without the intervention of an omniscient narrator or even the establishment of a hierarchy of narrative levels. Such an absence of a conventional hierarchy may help explain the apparent contradictions in Kafka’s narrative manner and the mutability of his narrative modes. Viewed from one perspective, “The Stoker” is a novella; viewed from another, it is the beginning of a novel that could have no proper end. The ordering power of the omniscient narrator is conspicuous by its absence, and this absence manifests itself in the intricate layering of ambivalences behind façades of narrative simplicity.

Kafka has used his novella “The Stoker” as a means of setting out the question that is characteristic of all his work—or, rather, he has set it before our very eyes in narrative form. This question is, of course, whether there are still any narratives available for the telling of individual uniqueness, for the recounting of that inalienable “naked life.” Thus, I conclude that he has given us, with this novella, his version of that poeto- logical primal scene which prefigures his art as a novelist, together with all the irresolvable contradictions active within it.

(Translated by Anthony Stephens)
Notes

1. All translations by Anthony Stephens.
2. A textual variant in *The Trial*: “Darum sei auch der Augenblick des Erwachens der riskanteste Augenblick im Tag, sei er einmal überstanden, ohne dass man irgendwohin von seinem Platze fortgezogen wurde, so könne man den ganzen Tag über getrost sein” (KKAP, 169) (“Therefore the moment of waking is the most perilous moment of the day—once you have survived it without being forcibly dislocated from your proper place, you can face all the rest of the day with confidence”).
3. In *Wilhelm Meister* this scenario is presented as a paradigm; on the reading of love relationships as patterns of identity, see Luhmann (1982). On the construction of individuality, see Luhmann (1994, 191–202).
4. In *Wilhelm Meister* this function is fulfilled by the marionette theatre, Tankred and Chlorinde, Mariane, and the fisher-boy.
5. This was a cliché in literature around the turn of the century, for example in Schnitzler’s “Der Reigen.”
6. Something similar is attempted by Rotpeter, the ape turned human, in Kafka’s “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie.”
7. “Als ihm der Vater den Koffer für immer übergeben hatte, hatte er im Scherz gefragt: Wie lange wirst du ihn haben?” (KKAV, 14) (“When his father had entrusted him with the suitcase for ever, he had asked jokingly, How long will you manage to keep it?”).
8. The stoker explicitly refers to it as “Wiedererkennung” (KKAV, 47) (“recognition”).
9. According to Musil (1914), Kafka showed himself as “a very conscious artist” (1170) whose narrative style is characterized by “total dissolution and total control” (1169). The protagonist’s actions are “entirely matters that can never be brought to an end that, from the perspective of the external world, dangle into it like broken off wires, and his thoughts are such as he can never think through to a conclusion” (Musil 1914, 1170). “It is deliberate naivety . . . something indirect, complicated, accomplished . . . a moral sensibility . . . of a refined and penetrating irritability” that “makes visible peculiar overlaps” (Musil 1914, 1170).
10. Roland Barthes terms this strategy “metanarrative, because it is a second language in which one speaks about the first” (1978, 115). Above all, I refer to Genette (1969, 1982, 1994).
11. Kafka’s short autobiographical text “Jeder Mensch ist eigentümlich . . . ” (KKANII, 7) (“Each person is unique . . . ”) is of great significance in this context. See also the chapter by Hillis Miller in this volume.
12. It is rewarding to consider slightly different expressions of this insight. See Derrida (1983; 1984, 88; 1992a; 1992b).
13. There are three doors in the narrative, the “kleine Tür” (KKAV, 8) (“little door”) before the stoker’s berth, the “heillos unvorbereitet (KKAV, 33) (“fatally unexpectedly”) opened door to the Captain’s cabin, and the “Türchen” (KKAV, 52) (“little door”) through which Karl and his uncle leave the ship by way of a set of stairs, possibly a gangway.
14. The twin concepts of syntagm and paradigm have been extensively used by Rainer Warning in his studies of Proust, following on from the narrative theory of
A. J. Greimas. For a discussion of the metaphor of the rhizome as a structural characteristic of Kafka’s narratives, see Deleuze and Guattari (1997).

Works Cited


