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Kafka’s Antitheatrical Gestures

MARTIN PUCHNER

No writer seems less made for the theater than Franz Kafka, withdrawn in his study, as we picture him, obsessively writing to keep everything safely away. This image of Kafka may be the artificial product of modernist myth-making, but enough of it rings true to question seriously whether Kafka’s scripture has anything to do with the theater at all. And yet Kafka’s austere writerliness does not proceed without constant reference to the theater. Kafka experimented with dramatic fragments; he was infatuated with a traveling group of Yiddish theater players for which he became the quasi-manager; and he recorded his keen interest in such canonical authors of modern drama as Strindberg, Kleist, Grillparzer, Hauptmann, Offenbach, and Hofmannsthal. His diaries and notebooks are full of vignettes about specific productions as well as brief reflections on the theater. On 9 November 1911, Kafka records, “Vorgestern geträumt: Lauter Theater” [Dreamt yesterday: everything theater], and this theatrical dream can be taken as a point of departure for investigating the significance of the theater for Kafka’s oeuvre.¹

Insisting on the centrality of the theater for Kafka also implies re-thinking the way we understand modernist literature; it means putting pressure on terms such as écriture, writerliness, and literariness that have become all-too-familiar instruments for institutionalizing and canonizing literary modernism from Mallarmé and Joyce to Stein and Kafka. No matter how much these and many other authors celebrate self-referentially the act of writing as the required ritual of high modernism, this writing is firmly, if not always visibly, connected to the theater. This does not mean that we should be content with noting that writers such as these are in some vague sense “theatrical”; rather, what is needed is a reflection on the manner in which they are engaged with the theater, if often in a conflictual or even adversarial manner. Mallarmé, Stein, and Joyce wrote extensively about the theater just as they often chose the dramatic form. Their dramas, however, are either repelled by or in competition with the theater. It is in a comparable manner that the theater acts on Kafka’s oeuvre, namely as a frame against which much of his writing struggles and to which it therefore remains calibrated.

As in the case of Mallarmé, James, Stein, Joyce, Hofmannsthal, Yeats, and Beckett, Kafka’s engagement with the theater determines his writing even and especially when it is no longer explicitly about or for the actual stage. Therefore, one
might measure Kafka's texts through a triangle formed by modernism, theater, and writing. These three terms create an area of congruence: a modernist antitheatricalism, a field determined by a struggle with and against the theater that is the motor of much modernist writing. When Mallarmé writes closet dramas that shun the stage as vulgar and celebrate writing as privileged medium; when Joyce in the “Circe” chapter of Ulysses turns to the dramatic form without desire for a stage production; when James rewrites his plays as novels; when Stein creates texts that resemble plays but have no *dramatis personae*—all these are moments when the most central writers of modernism develop their style by using aspects of the theater to keep it at a distance, by turning the dramatic form against the theater. These writers are far from indifferent to the theater. On the contrary, they testify to the centrality of the theater for modernism, but as something that must be resisted. Likewise, I will argue, Kafka's prose is not so much theatrical as it is antitheatrical, presenting dramatic and theatrical scenes and characters only to decompose and recompose them according to a specifically literary poetics. Kafka relates to the stage through a resistance to the theater, and it is against this resistance that directors have sought to turn his texts into theatrical performance.

More surprising, perhaps, than this literary and dramatic rebellion against theatrical presentation is the fact that modernist antitheatricalism influenced theatrical practice itself. Directors who made it their business to bring modernist closet dramas on the stage also imported their antitheatricalism and then had to confront this antitheatricalism in the theater. Far from paralyzing the theater, antitheatricalism became one of the engines for innovation on the stage, prompting directors such as Lugné-Poe and E. G. Craig to rethink and question their understanding of actors, mise-en-scène, and the dramatic text. Kafka adaptations to the stage, both in their successes and failures, are part of this tradition of antitheatrical theater. These productions do not reveal that Kafka's work was always somehow theatrical and therefore secretly made for the stage, but rather they indicate that the theater was drawn to Kafka, as to other antitheatrical modernists, precisely because of his resistance to the theater.

I. Antitheatrical Drama

The claim that modernist writing derives from a contentious relation to the theater finds in Kafka a particularly satisfying example, for we can examine directly the struggle between literature and theater in his early experiments with the dramatic form. What is so central about these short dramatic scenes is not their intrinsic value nor their theatrical imagination but the very unease with which they relate to the theater. The earliest such dramatic fragment, jotted down in a diary in 1911, presents three dialogues between two characters. The author's discomfort with the theater emerges not so much in the dialogue itself but rather in the use of the stage direction, that part of the dramatic form most directly calibrated to the actual theater. Kafka's stage directions, however, do little by way of indicating motivation, of sketching scenes, or of outlining the basic stage
business of entrances and exits. In the third dialogue, for example, one stage direction laconically arrests the text with a sudden, enigmatic gesture, indicating that Karl, while complaining, "Weil du keine Rücksicht nimmst" [Because you never care for my feelings, T 126], is rubbing his fingers, "reibt sich die Finger." The connection between speech and gesture remains opaque. The stage direction is entirely descriptive, stubbornly refusing its traditional role of providing a frame for theatrical adaptation and interpretation. All this stage direction does is to zoom in on a single gesture, or even a part of a gesture, and detaches it from its immediate corporeal and theatrical context.

Similarly isolated and extracted gestures are prominent in Kafka's other dramatic texts. A second fragment, written in 1913, presents a dialogue between a man and a woman that soon turns into a physical fight before it ends abruptly in a tableau of frozen gestures. Further fragments, all less than a page long, indicate the same obsessive attention to details of gestures, such as a "ungelenk ziehende Bewegungen" [clumsy, dragging movements], a compulsive "[he] nagt an den Lippen" [is biting his lips], or "[she] zieht die Tragbänder der Schürze in die Höhe" [is pulling up the ends of the apron, T 232]. In none of these excessive details can we hope to find additional information about motivation, character, or stage action. It is not, however, that Kafka wrote all these dramas without considering the theater at all. On the contrary, his stage directions strategically mislead the reader by pretending that a theatrical performance is indeed the purpose of these dialogues, but then frustrate this expectation by undermining the traditional function of the stage direction. It is by turning the stage direction against the stage that Kafka develops his first antitheatrical strategy.

How this use of the stage direction would end up influencing Kafka's later writings can be fathomed from his longest dramatic piece, Der Gruftwächter [The Crypt Guard] (1916–1917), which was found by Max Brod among Kafka's octavo notebooks and published in 1936 together with other texts from the literary bequest under the title Beschreibung eines Kampfes.2 Again, we have excessive details and arrested gestures, but now something of an acting style emerges out of the more-developed movements and interactions: These figures engage in an extreme form of melodramatic acting that will remain a persistent feature of Kafka's later work. At one point, a guard "wirft sich weinend hin" [throws himself to the ground, crying, B 225], while other characters do such things as show their trembling fists, cry, and raise their index fingers threateningly. The center piece of Der Gruftwächter, however, is a narration, as the guard describes his nightly battle against family ghosts who are trying to escape from the crypt. From the ghostly knocking on the window with "inhuman" fingers, "Das sind nicht menschliche Fingerknöchel" [these are not human knuckles, B 227], we are introduced to a scenario in which the guard is actually lifted up from the ground as he pushes the ghosts back in a manner that resembles more a dance than a fight: "schon schaukeln wir im Kampf" [already we are swinging (rocking) in the battle, B 230]. Here, the choreography of gestures and the interaction of characters are entirely detached from the requirements of the stage. The guard's story
thus takes over and continues the decomposition of the theatrical scene Kafka had begun in his antitheatrical stage directions.

With this piece, Kafka moves from stage direction to descriptive narration. After the *Griftvächter*, Kafka never returned to drama. Not that Kafka simply realized that he was made for narrative rather than for drama; rather, the origin of his narrative style in the stage direction indicates how much his later narrative prose continued to be tied to the theater, if by way of decomposing it. One might say that Kafka's prose originates not so much in drama but in a combination of the antitheatrical stage direction and staged storytelling.

The formal transition from drama to narrative can be observed live, as it were, in a piece that Kafka wrote first as drama only to rewrite it immediately as a (very) short story. At an unusually early hour, a maid announces an unexpected visitor, Kleipe, to her master, a student. Trying to justify his calling on the student at such an untimely hour, the visitor stutters that he and the student both come from the same small city of Wulfshausen. Again, the dialogue is secondary; what really matters are the gestures that postpone and supplement the visitor's verbal explanation:3  "Kleipe: geht langsam zum Bett und sucht auf dem Weg durch Handbewegungen etwas zu erklären. Beim Reden hilft er sich durch Strecken des Halses und durch Hoch- und Tiefführen der Augenbrauen: Ich bin nämlich auch aus Wulfenshausen" [Kleipe: goes slowly toward the bed and on the way tries to explain something with his hand-gestures. He stretches his neck and raises and lowers his eyebrows to assist his speech: You know, I too am from Wulfenshausen, *T 270*]. The hand gestures precede the verbal explanation, and even when he finally gets the sentence out, he still has to revert to gestures—this time the movements of the neck and eyebrows—to explain his early visit. All this is described in a stage direction that well exceeds the speech it is putatively "assisting"; additional stage directions single out other peculiar aspects such as the visitor's unusually long arms, "lange Arme." The stage direction indeed dominates this dramatic text, and it must have been this fact that compelled Kafka to rewrite the entire text as a narrative story.

The narrative version is much shorter, condensing over half a page of dramatic text into two sentences, benefiting from a medium that does not have to worry about actors' continual presence and interaction on a stage. The first sentence introduces the story in a most conventional narrative style: "Gegen fünf Uhr früh, einmal im Winter, wurde dem Studenten durch das halbbekleidete Dienstmädchen ein Gast gemeldet" [Around five o'clock on a winter morning, a half-dressed maid announced a visitor to the student, *T 270*]. The next sentence renders what is left of the theatrical scene itself:

"Was denn? Wie denn?" fragte der Student noch schlaftrunken, da trat schon mit einer von dem Dienstmädchen geliehenen brennenden Kerze ein junger Mann ein, hob in der einen Hand die Kerze, um den Studenten besser zu sehen, und senkte in der anderen Hand den Hut fast bis zur Erde, so lange war sein Arm. ["What now," asked the student, who was still sleepy, as a young man was already entering the
room with a candle, which he had borrowed from the maid, raised with the one hand the candle to see the student better, and lowered the hat with the other hand almost touching the floor, so long was his arm. T 270]

This narrative version proceeds by isolating a gesture, pushing it to its limit (the arm touching the floor, the candle abruptly raised to the face), and freezing it in a tableau so that its aesthetic component—the symmetry of the one hand raised and the other lowered—exaggerates and exceeds the function of greeting. This isolated gesture not only freezes the imaginary theatrical space but decomposes the very elements—the integrity of characters, the continuity of theatrical action—on which theatrical space and the continual presence of actors depend. Refusing to connect gesture and dialogue, Kafka demotivates his characters, and by isolating specific gestures, he decomposes what would otherwise be their continued existence as acting bodies on a stage.

This decomposition characterizes the relationship of Kafka's later oeuvre to the theater, motivated by a struggle against the theater. This struggle begins with stage directions, continues with staged narratives, and is fully developed once Kafka rewrites these stage directions and staged stories in the narrative form.

At times, the theater and the performing arts enter his texts thematically, as in the hunger artist and the display of his gradually disappearing body; the ape's mimetic adaptation of human speech and gesture; the questionable talents of Josefine, a singer and performer within a society of mice; and the audience's embarrassment caused by the performing dogs. In these texts, Kafka also reflects on the audience, on its participation and constitutive role in the creation of a performance. It does not matter so much, for example, how well Josefine sings as long as the audience takes pleasure in what she is doing. In fact, the audience's voyeurism becomes intrusive; it bothers, for example, the hunger artist and the singing dogs, plagued as they are by an acute case of stage fright. But it is not necessary for Kafka to embed his figures in actual theatrical scenes. Theatrical posing and the audience's eager gazes can happen anywhere. _The Trial_ exposes the voyeurs witnessing the arrest of Josef K., and the grisly execution in _The Penal Colony_ is justified through its cathartic effects on both the victim and the audience: "alles Theater."

More important than the actual theater and its audience is the manner in which Kafka takes apart the performing body, analyzing it as isolated gestures and poses, entirely disconnected from one another. From this perspective, I would like to reconsider what many critics have referred to as Kafka's "dramatic" style, in particular Joseph Vogl's account of "enacted scenes," and also analyze the manner in which Kafka estranges movements and gestures from their context. I want to pursue the concept of estrangement further, for the Brechtian term "estrangement" itself derives from an antitheatrical impulse, what Brecht called his deep "distrust of the theater." Kafka's prose arises from a similar distrust and a similar desire to play off the narrative—or epic—against the theater, a form of writerly antitheatricalism that nevertheless keeps the theater close at hand.
II. Critique of the Theater

Inspired by Max Brod’s essay “Axiome über das Drama” ["Axioms on Drama"] published in the journal Schaubühne [The Stage], Kafka began writing down reflections on drama and theater from which we can deduce a critique of theatrical representation, the belated theory to match his antitheatrical practice. Brod theorizes that the theater alone is capable of a full and continuous representation of characters and scenes, whereas the novel has to pick and choose, contenting itself with highlights of a few essential moments. The abundance of an actual theatrical performance is thus set in contrast to the necessary restraint of the novel. Kafka agrees with this distinction but reverses the values: The necessary ellipses and economy are the novel’s strength and the continuous presence of scenes, the theater’s curse.

What most bothers Kafka and many modernist, antitheatrical writers is the physical, unmediated, and continuous presence of human actors in the theater. In a passage that is as metaphorical as it is intricate, Kafka describes the process of personification, “Vermenschlichung,” that occurs once a text is turned into theatrical performance:

Dadurch gerät das Drama in seiner höchsten Entwicklung in eine unerträgliche Vermenschlichung, die herabzuziehen, erträglich zu machen, Aufgabe des Schauspielers ist, der die ihm vorgeschriebene Rolle gelockert, zerfasert, wehend um sich trägt. Das Drama schwebt also in der Luft, aber nicht als ein vom Sturm getragenes Dach, sondern als ein ganzes Gebäude, dessen Grundmauern mit einer heute noch dem Irrsinn sehr nahen Kraft aus der Erde hinauf gerissen worden sind.

[The drama, in its highest development, brings about an insufferable humanization (re-anthropomorphization), and it is the task of the actor to pull it down, to make it bearable by wearing the prescribed role loose, fracturing it so that it blows about around himself. The drama is hovering in the air, but not as a roof that is carried by a storm, but as a whole building, the foundation of which is ripped out of the earth with a force that still today comes close to madness. T 92]

Like Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, and other turn-of-the-century theater reformers, Kafka is both intrigued and appalled by the anthropomorphization or personification that is the inevitable consequence of the presence of human actors on a stage. For Kafka, this personification is so strange that he resorts to a far-fetched metaphor, which, however, is itself borrowed from the theater, namely that of an ill-fitting costume. The actor does not impersonate the role mimetically, but rather “wears” it like a dress so that the role “blows about him” like a piece of cloth. Moreover, this humanization is not a completed process—a well-fitting dress—but an incomplete and ill-fitting one. The actor must “loosen” the role that is constantly in the process of breaking down, of “fraying out.” To this first metaphor Kafka adds a second one that takes the drama to be “flying in the air” with the actor’s awkward humanization “pulling it down.” The actor is somehow caught in a double-edged struggle, a struggle against a role he must both impersonate and keep at bay—wear like a dress and fray—and against a drama that he both uproots and pulls down again.
A different entry combines these two metaphors, the dress and of the struggle with drama:

Manchmal scheint es, daß das Stück oben in den Soffitten ruht, die Schauspieler Streifen davon abgezogen haben, deren Enden sie zum Spielen in den Händen halten oder um den Körper gewickelt haben, und daß nur hin und da ein schwerabzulesender Streifen einen Schauspieler zum Schrecken des Publikums in die Höhe nimmt.

[Sometimes it seems as if the play were resting up there in the decoration of the ceiling, that the actors have torn strips from it, holding the ends playfully in their hands or having wrapped it around their bodies, and that only here and there a stripe that is hard to tear is pulling up the actor in the air, which is scaring the audience. T 92]

The drama is somewhere in the air, and if the actors tear pieces from it, the unbearable humanization of the drama is made bearable, presumably, because the play appears only in strips and pieces, at no point fitting the actor fully and neatly, thus resisting a tight mimesis of a human character. The actors are struggling with the play, tearing it apart, but the play strikes back by pulling them up in the air, carrying them away and thus subjecting them to its own will. Role, play, and the acting body are thus never in congruence; the play and the actor are like a curtain, a piece of cloth, or a dress that is torn apart and appears only in pieces.

In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka describes the marionette-like aesthetics of much theater, "etwas tief Marionettenhaftes" [something deeply marionette-like, Briefe 214], and in yet another entry, Kafka explicitly contrasts his own passion for details with the craft exercised by actors on a stage:


[My desire to imitate has nothing to do with the actor, in particular it is lacking unity and continuity. I cannot imitate that which is crude and that which draws attention and is characteristic; similar attempts have always failed, they are against my nature. However, I have the urge to imitate the way in which certain people handle their walking stick, the way they are holding their hands, and the movements of their fingers, and I manage to do it without difficulty. Briefe 161]

Acting and actors are foreign to him precisely because of the continually personifying nature of theatrical representation. Kafka himself fails in the task of presenting a "unified" [einheitlich] character; all he can do is mimic details. It is in this critique of the actor that Kafka participates in the modernist, antitheatrical tradition, ranging from Mallarmé and Yeats to Craig and Beckett. What these writers and directors object to is the physical presence of human bodies on the stage that impress onto the theater an irreducible and seemingly unmediated form of continuous and character-driven mimesis, resistant to abstraction, dislocation,
and estrangement. Some directors, such as Craig, respond to this problem by demanding that actors be replaced with marionettes, and others, such as Yeats and Beckett, by arresting actors in urns and ash bins. Like them, Kafka fantasizes about a drama that arrests actors and keeps them from acting altogether: "das beste Drama [wäre] ein ganz anregungsloses zum Beispiel philosophisches Drama, das von sitzenden Schauspielern in einer beliebigen Zimmerdekoration vorgelesen würde" [The best drama would be one without stimulation or movement, for example a philosophical drama, read by actors sitting surrounded by an irrelevant decoration. T 91]. Not only are the actors sitting; Kafka describes this drama as "anregungslos," which describes the absence of stimulation and also includes the meaning of "regungslos"—without movement. The suggestion that such a drama would be philosophical points in the direction of Plato and the fact that the long antitheatrical tradition originates not in Aristotle but in Plato’s dialogues; Kafka imagines what could be called a Platonist theater.9

This reading or closet theater is just a speculation on Kafka’s part, but what he actually does in his own writings has the same effect, namely the undoing of theater. Instead of writing philosophical closet dramas or arresting actors, Kafka takes apart these human bodies in the act of writing down their gestures. In this, his use of the literary against the theatrical is akin to the modernist closet drama, including the closet dramas of Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal, and Joyce, which likewise fragment the stage through the medium of literature.

III. Writing Down Actors

In emphasizing Kafka’s decomposition of actors, I do not mean to suggest that actors were for him just theoretical or hypothetical figures. On the contrary, Kafka’s dramatic experiments and emerging theory of the theater coincide with his acquaintance with several actors through his engagement with the Yiddish theater. Since Evelyn Torton Beck’s magisterial study Kafka and the Yiddish Theater (1971), it has become impossible to consider Kafka’s relation to the theater without an account of his particular relation to the Yiddish theater, and so it is necessary to apply my argument to this, Kafka’s most well-known theatrical episode.10

Beginning in May 1910, Kafka and Max Brod adopted the habit of frequenting the Café-Restaurant Savoy where a Hassidic theater group from Lemberg gave regular performances that lasted, with interruptions, until January 1912.11 Kafka recorded more than one hundred pages of visits to the theater, to the varieté, and to other types of theatrical performances in his diaries, but his visits to the Yiddish theater left the most lasting impression. Not only did he become a regular in the Café Savoy, he also befriended the actor Jizchak Löwy, organized guest performances for this theater troupe in other cities, and tried to raise money and recognition for the Yiddish theater among the blasé Prague Jewish middle class that regarded the Hassidic actors and their language as primitive, foreign, and improper.12 And, of course, he fell in love with the actor Mania Tschissik. There can
be no doubt, then, that this encounter with the Yiddish theater constitutes Kafka’s most intimate and sustained engagement with the theater.

He engaged the Yiddish theater primarily through the mode of literary decomposition. This is exemplified in Kafka’s love for Mania Tschissik, which he noted in his diary could only be satisfied “durch Literatur oder Beischlaf” [through literature or intercourse, T 107]. Kafka, it may come as no surprise, chose literature. The kind of literature, however, through which Kafka “satisfied” his love for Tschissik is not just the writing of literature in general but a particular type of writing against the theater. This literature does not take the form of the dramatic fragments but of extensive notes, descriptions, and transcriptions of theatrical scenes and episodes, many of them centered on Tschissik’s performances, which Kafka jotted down in his diaries. In them, Kafka experiments with different types of writing on the theater, the plot of the performance, the quality of the singing, and the significance of the play. In particular, however, Kafka is intrigued by the actor’s gestures, postures, and mannerisms. One day, for example, he notes triumphantly: “Neu an ihr erkannte Bewegungen; Drücken der Hand in die Tiefe des nicht sehr guten Mieders, kurzes Zucken der Schultern und Hüften beim Hohn, besonders wenn sie dem Verhöhnten den Rücken zukehrt” [I recognized some new movements; the hand pressed at the depth of the shabby bodice, short jerks of the shoulders and hips when expressing scorn, especially when she turns her back toward the scorned, T 107]. Anything that can enlarge his inventory of gestures is noted in the diary, which becomes his storage space for gestures to be used in his later literary oeuvre.

To wrest gestures from the theater and to store them in his diary, Kafka needed to develop strategies for representing these gestures in writing. The diary not only supplies the gestures Kafka will use in his fictional texts but also imposes on them a particular mode of representation that appears in his stage directions. In his diaries, Kafka perfects his technique of representing theatrical gestures by radically isolating them, taking them out of their original context, and depersonifying or dehumanizing them. Kafka here continues a genre of writing against the theater and the actor’s body developed in Mallarmé’s *Crayonné au théâtre*. It is a tradition characterized by a singular form of attention to details of gestures and specifically one that detaches them from their theatrical context. At the heart of this project stands a poetics of the moving body, the question of how exactly one can capture actors’ or dancers’ movements through words: “Notwendigkeit, über Tänzerinnen mit Rufzeichen zu reden” [Necessity of writing with exclamation marks about dancers, T 198]. Competing with the theater, the text must create its own technique of writing movement, for which the use of question marks is perhaps not a particularly sophisticated but telling proposal.

Beside punctuation, Kafka also develops a rhetoric, a figurative mode of representing gestures. In one of the numerous pieces on Tschissik, he writes:

Kafka wants to create a poetics of movement with which to capture theatrical acting in descriptive prose. After characterizing Tschissik’s mode of gesturing as “ceremonious,” he goes on to encode the specific kind of ceremony within the language of his text. Tschissik’s hands, slowly moving up and down, certainly do evoke the impression of ceremony; but when Kafka notes how her arms describe the same curve as her hips do, the characteristic of ceremony is replaced by the image of a slow dance, which gives way to a hypothetical game, “als spiele sie mit einem langsamen fliegenden Ball” [as if she were playing with a ball that was flying slowly]. The final image of the ball is added onto the moving body; it is not itself tied firmly to the rest of the sentence, but adjoined by “as if” that keeps the actually executed gestures and the hypothetical game apart, an impression reinforced by the fact that the ball is flying impossibly slowly. In fact, the entire ball game is nothing but a comparison; it does not fit and needs to be adjusted retrospectively. All of these elements do not quite work. It is as if Kafka wanted to make trouble for the machinery of theatrical presentation by inserting ill-fitting comparisons, hypotheses, and projections, a writing that takes apart the stage through series of “as ifs” and figurative pantomimes.

Gestures in the Yiddish theater, however, are not only ceremonial, they are also melodramatic. Because of the often loud audience, gathered in bars and cafés around provisional stages, the Yiddish actors must take recourse in gestures, because their words, polyglot words, are in danger of being misunderstood if they are heard at all.14 Max Brod noted the often unintentionally comical presentations in the Café Savoy and the tendency toward kitsch and wild exaggerations (139). Similarly, Kafka observes that the main fault of these actors is simply that they make too much of an effort, “so ist doch auch dieser auf der Bühne herabgeschneite Schauspieler nur deshalb schlecht, weil er zu stark nachahmt” [this actor who has suddenly appeared on the stage is so bad only because he imitates too much, T 161]. Peter Brooks has identified this type of exaggerated gesturing as the basic feature of melodramatic acting, characterized by the insufficiency of speech.15 Melodramatic gesturing signals this insufficiency and the resulting struggle for expressing in gesture what cannot be adequately expressed in language. These gestures do not succeed in taking over the work of articulation and must content themselves with announcing their own failure. In a similar manner, Kafka highlights the way in which gestures replace insufficient words without forming a fully articulated second language. Kafka does not seek to translate gestures back into language...

[Her way of walking is somewhat ceremonious since she has the habit of slowly lifting, extending, and moving her long arms. Especially when she was singing the Jewish national anthem, moving her hips with her arms, bent in concordance to the hips, moving up and down with hands curved as if she were playing with a ball that was flying slowly. T 82]
but contents himself with registering their effects and also their limits:

Aus der Menge ihres wahren Spiels kommen hie und da Vorstök des Faust, Drehungen des Armes, der unsichtbare Schleppen in den Falten um den Körper zieht, Anlegen der gespreizten Finger an die Brust, weil der kunstlose Schrei nicht genügt. Ihr Spiel ist nicht mannigfaltig; [. . .] das Sichaufrichten beim Widerstand, das den Zuschauer zwingt, sich um ihren ganzen Körper zu kümmern.

[From the multitude of her true play, here and there we see sudden jerks of the fist, turns of the arm, which is dragging invisible trains around the body in the folds of the dress, and how she puts her outspread fingers to her breast, since her artless scream does not suffice. Her playing is not much varied (. . .) the way she stands up when posing resistance forces the audience to pay attention to her whole body. T 83]

The moments Kafka singles out—the violently gesturing arms, clenched fists and outspread fingers pressed to the breast in emotional turmoil—are melodramatic gestures, because the emotions expressed are too overpowering to be conveyed in language; even screams fail. The center of expression is thus dislocated from the mouth to the body as a whole, “das den Zuschauer zwingt, sich um ihren ganzen Körper zu kümmern” [forcing the audience to pay attention to her whole body]. Kafka does not worry about whether this gesturing body succeeds in giving expression to emotions and passions. Nor does he show any interest in evaluating this acting as acting. Instead, he takes melodrama as the material that allows him to exercise his own project of analyzing melodramatic gestures by decomposing them.16

The Yiddish theater uses another mode of gesturing, akin to the melodramatic project of encoding emotions and passions in gestures and poses where language fails: pantomime. Here too, however, Kafka does not simply seek to represent pantomime in his texts but to detach it from its original theatrical context. He characterized Tschissik’s ceremonious gesturing “as if playing with a ball”; the pantomime here lies not in the gesture of the actor but in the eye of the beholder or, rather, in Kafka’s text. The same act of what might be called projected pantomime—of figuring gestures in terms of pantomime—returns when Tschissik's gesturing arm is said to be “pulling invisible trains around the body in the folds of the dress.” The dancer’s gestures are described as acts of pantomime, gesturing “as if” the actor were in a certain situation and “as if” a specific stage prop were at hand. Although melodrama signals the limits of speech, pantomime is premised on its absence but also on the ability of gestures to take its place. In pantomime, however, speech is not the only thing that is absent. Almost as important is the absence of central stage props and other contextual elements: a ball game is enacted without a ball; a boxing match executed without ever hitting the opponent. Purposeful movement is arrested halfway or otherwise deprived of its goal; what has been a means to an end—throwing a ball; hitting an opponent—becomes an end in itself. It is the elimination of purpose that turns pantomimic gestures into signs, signaling the suggestion of a ball game or a boxing match without it really occurring onstage.

In another example of projected and therefore figurative theatricality, we can
see Kafka’s view of theater as a space where causality and motivation can be not only feigned but inverted:

Schönes: wie Frau Tschissik unter den Händen der römischen Soldaten (die sie allerdings erst zu sich reißen mußte, denn sie fürchteten sich offenbar, sie anzurühren) sich wand, während die Bewegungen der drei Menschen durch ihre Sorge und Kunst fast, nur fast, dem Rhythmus des Gesanges folgten. Das Lied, in dem sie die Erscheinung des Messias ankündigte und, ohne zu stören, nur infolge ihrer Macht, Harfenspiel durch Bewegungen der Violin-Bogenführung dastellt.

What Kafka creates is a scene of projected, figurative pantomimes: the actor evokes the image of harp-playing even though there is no such instrument at hand, and the way she does so is by imitating another type of movement: the movements of the violin bow. It remains unclear whether she is actually holding a violin bow in her hands, using it as a prop for the harp-imitation, or whether she is miming—at least for the observer Kafka—the harp by miming the gesture of violin bowing. This double pantomime follows another curious twist on stage gestures: although the actor is supposed to be roughly handled by the Roman soldiers, Kafka notes that in fact it is the other way around; it is she who has to pull the soldiers, who are too shy to play rough, so that she and not the soldiers is performing the active part. Again Kafka’s text intervenes in the theater, separating action, stage prop, and effects on the audience. No gesture remains itself but instead refers to something else so that nothing on stage can be taken at face value—at one point, he observes that actors embracing one another on stage are in fact holding each other’s wigs: “Wenn die Schauspieler einander umarmen, halten sie einander gegenseitig die Perücken fest” (T 172). This is not an interpretation of a performance; it is an analysis that separates its components, disconnecting them from one another, undoing the coherent space of the theater and the continuous action that unfolds there. Undoing the theater, however, does not create chaos; on the contrary, it is that which leads to the aesthetic itself, what Kafka simply calls beauty, “Schönes!”

IV. Antitheatrical and Minor Gestures

Since Walter Benjamin’s early essays on Kafka, the term often attributed to the theatrical traces in Kafka’s writing is that of gesture or of a gestural language. Here too, a discussion of Kafka’s antitheatricalism, the way in which his texts decompose actors, can provide a way of understanding the gestural in a new light. At first sight, gestures seem to belong simply to the theatrical, and the notion of a gestural language thus points toward a theatrical quality in Kafka’s writing. In
light of the preceding analysis, however, I will argue that Kafka’s so-called gestural style, too, must be understood in terms of his larger antitheatricalism. Kafka’s technique of decomposing Tschissik and her fellow actors of the Yiddish theater provides the best point of departure for this argument, for the term “gesture,” in Kafka’s mind, was firmly connected to Yiddish. Kafka experienced Yiddish, a language considered uncouth among Prague’s upper-middle-class Jews, primarily in the Yiddish theater. In his lecture on Yiddish, therefore, Kafka defines this language entirely in terms of the Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European actor: “Jargon ist alles, Wort, chassidische Melodie und das Wesen dieses ostjüdischen Schauspielers selbst” [Yiddish is everything, word, Hassidic melody, and the essence of this east-Jewish actor himself, H 309]. Yiddish, in Kafka’s eyes, is essentially musical and theatrical language, a language of actors.

There is only a small but a significant step from the theatrical to the gestural, from a theatrical language to a gestural one. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka describes Yiddish as “eine organische Verbindung von Papierdeutsch und Gebärdensprache” [a combination of Paper-German and a language of gestures, Briefe 336]. Paper-German refers to an administrative language imposed on Prague by Vienna. This bureaucratic German is now confronted with a particular kind of corporeal language, Gebärdensprache. When Kafka talks about this dialect as a body language, he means this literally, physically, and gesturally, continuing the type of transcription that was so characteristic for his writings on actors and the theater. The passage continues: “wie plastisch ist dieses [. . .] den Oberarm ausrenkende und das Kinn hinaufreiBende: Glauben Sie! oder dieses die Knie aneinander zerreibende: ‘er schreibt. Über wem?’” [How plastic it is, this (.) “You believe this!” that dislocates the arm and pulls up one’s chin, or this “he writes. About who? (sic),” that grinds down the knees on one another, Briefe 336]. Specific expressions and idioms seem to be intrinsically tied to certain gestures and movements, such as pulling up the chin, throwing the arms about, and grinding knees. It is almost as if Kafka’s machine of decomposing gestures is now being applied to gestural language or the gestural effects of language itself. The gestures inscribed in or evoked by Yiddish are not continuous theatrical actions, but isolated, decomposed, and enigmatic gestures like the ones isolated by Kafka’s antitheatrical stage directions.

In addition, Yiddish is not simply a gestural language but a combination of a hypothetical and unspecified gestural language and Paper-German. This combination of Paper-German and a language of gestures is a heterogeneous mix of body and bureaucracy, and one that leads to a contested interaction between them: Gestures introduce an element of instability, an ungovernable movement, into proper or Paper-German, which comes to life only when “Judenhände sie [die Sprache] durchwühlen” [Jewish hands rake (it) up (the German language), Briefe 337]. What Kafka describes here is a process of undoing and redoing German that makes it both familiar and strange. On the one hand, Yiddish consists exclusively of foreign words, “Fremdwörter”; on the other hand, however, Kafka assures his audience, “wie viel mehr Jargon Sie verstehen als Sie glauben” [You
will understand much more Yiddish than you think], arguing that Yiddish is a mixture of chaos and order: “In diesem Treiben herrschen aber wieder Bruchstücke bekannter Sprachgesetze” [one can find fragments of well-known linguistic laws, H 306, 307]. It is this combination of familiarity and estrangement that Deleuze and Guattari took as the definition of a minor literature. We can take it also as a description of the peculiar relation between literariness and theater that marks Kafka’s prose, between a paper language and a gestural one, and thus define Kafka’s decomposed, antitheatrical gestures as “minor” gestures.

The earliest critic who applied a notion of gesture to Kafka’s œuvre was Walter Benjamin, and it is therefore in response to his reading that an antitheatrical reading of the gestural in Kafka must be developed. Benjamin writes: “Kafka’s ganzes Werk [stellt] einen Kodex von Gesten [dar]” [Kafka’s whole work presents a codex of gestures]. And in notes for an essay on Kafka, we can find a further specification: “Gesten [. . . ] die immer wieder neu vom Verfasser inszeniert und beschriftet werden, ohne ihren symbolischen Gehalt einer bestimmten Stelle auszuliefern” [gestures that are ever staged anew and inscribed by the author without delivering their symbolic substance at a particular place, 173]. Gesture here becomes a special case of Benjamin’s master-trope: allegory. Gestures are “staged” [inszeniert], but they are also “inscribed,” “subscribed,” or better yet, “labeled” [beschriftet] in the manner of the allegorical imago whose meaning is assured by a controlling subscriptio. What is specific about the allegorical gesturality of Kafka, however, is that the gestures Kafka represents are often opaque and therefore render the act of reading difficult. Although the language referring to gestures can be read immediately, the signifying gestures to which it refers cannot. The language of gesture works by suggestion, not by explicit reference; it remains opaque or, as Benjamin terms it, “cloudy.” In a comment on Vor dem Gesetz, he writes, “Etwas war immer nur im Gestus für Kafka fassbar. Und dieser Gestus, den er nicht verstand, bildet die wolke Stelle der Parabeln. Aus ihr geht Kafka’s Dichtung hervor” [Kafka could grasp some things always only in gesture. And this gesture, which he did not understand, forms the cloudy (nebulous) spot of the parables. From this gesture, arises Kafka’s fiction. Benjamin über Kafka 27]. In the middle of the parable, instead of a tertium comparationis, instead of an element that would allow for a transposition of the parable and hence for its comprehension, we are left with a gesture that remains vague no matter how much we may try to label it with meaning.

Gesture thus escapes rigid labeling and fixed meaning, and it is for this reason that the category of gesture has surfaced with such frequency in the several “crises of language,” especially the one that is most closely associated with Kafka, namely the turn-of-the-century crisis of language whose spiritual center was Vienna. Drawing on older debates about the origin of language from Vico to Warburton and from Condillac and Rousseau to Herder, this crisis of language took the form of a widespread obsession with finding a more expressive alternative to conventional and therefore dead—should we say “paper”—language. This is the way in which Werner Hamacher reads Benjamin’s figure of the
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"cloudy spot," arguing that in Kafka gesture is "what remains of language after meaning is withdrawn from it and it is gesture that withdraws from meaning" (329). In this line of argument, gestures are the expressive substrata of a language without meaning, and the projected theater in Kafka would be the technique with which Kafka stages this expressive or expressionist language of gestures.

What is less often mentioned in discussions of the crisis of language is its relation to the theater. The best example is Hugo von Hofmannsthal, one of the most prominent representatives of this crisis, who decided to stop writing narrative prose and to write drama and opera instead, for only on the stage is language truly aided and taken over by gesture. In Kafka, as always, there is not such a direct solution. On the contrary, gesture for him not only implies a critique of language but also, and more importantly, a critique of the theater. This is true not only for Kafka but also for his first "gestural" commentator, Benjamin, whose writing and thinking was itself deeply engaged in a conflicted relation to the theater, a relation that is nowhere as clear as in his The Origin of the German Trauerspiel. Its object of study is a form of drama that hovers on the edge of the closet drama, because the Trauerspiel was never a major performance genre. Even when it was performed, it appeared only as private, closed stagings, semistagings, or dramatic readings. Thus, Benjamin develops a theory of an allegory that is never far from writing and scripture, an attempt to theorize a theater that encompasses writing. Benjamin is engaged in a form of modernist antitheatricalism that compulsively rewrites the theater as text. This antitheatrical understanding of Benjamin can be extended to Kafka as well. Kafka's so-called gestural style should not be understood simply as a name for some vaguely theatrical quality but for the contest between text and theater or, more specifically, between the Yiddish of actors and Paper-German. Kafka does not so much borrow from the Yiddish theater as write against it; he does not simply transport gestures from the stage to the page but decomposes and recomposes them according to the antitheatrical logic of his writing.

Benjamin's and Kafka's antitheatricalism, like most antitheatricalism, always comes back to the live human actor on a stage, and it is in relation to the actor that the antitheatrical impulse can be detected most clearly. Benjamin compares Kafka's characters to actors, but the only actors he identifies are the foreign, nonnaturalistic, and stylized actors of the Chinese theater. It is not necessary to venture quite so far, even though Chinese and Japanese theater did have an influence on the modernist theater, for the foreignness of Kafka's gestures stems not from their being Chinese, but from Kafka's technique of decomposition, which functions whether or not the actors thus decomposed were originally Chinese, Yiddish, or Habsburg-Austrian. Decomposing actors is one of the primary activities of modernist and avant-garde theater, and so it is in this decomposition that the tradition of modernist antitheatrical theater and Kafka's antitheatrical literature meet. It is perhaps in light of this qualification that we can understand Adorno's attempt to critique Benjamin's "theatrical" reading of Kafka by claiming that Kafka should be understood in relation to film. What Adorno had noticed was
precisely Kafka’s antitheatrical impulse, which indeed means that Kafka’s scenes and characters are no longer simply of the theater. However, this does not necessarily turn them into cinematic exercises unless one remembers, as Benjamin himself did in his most well-known text of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproducibility, that film can be understood in an antitheatrical sense: it does away with live actors, decomposing them through cuts, close-ups, and framing. Modernist literature as represented by Kafka undertakes a similar feat through techniques of writing, which therefore should be called antitheatrical if it is understood that the prefix “anti” does not signify a simple negation of the theater. Rather, it signifies a struggle against the theater in which the theater leaves its mark on literature. It is this struggle from which Kafka’s writing derives.

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NOTES


3. Julia Kristeva considers gesture as that which belongs to the process of articulation, the means of production of language. The end product of this corporeal and gestural process would be the conventional sign. Semiotik: Recherches pur une sémanalyse (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969).


6. This metaphor, derived from the sphere of dress and clothes, is part of a larger pattern, a fascination with dress and ornament as analyzed by Mark M. Anderson in his Kafka’s Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Sicle (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

7. Mallarmé uses the same set of images—weaving a role like a dress with a loosened train—to characterize the transformation of the human dancer into a depersonalized figure on the stage.


12. When Kafka brought home his new friend Löwy, his father remarked in front of
the friend about “foreigners” being brought to the house and about “useless” acquaintances (T 234).


16. In this, he oddly parallels the history of modern theater and drama from Eugene O’Neill to Heiner Müller, which can be seen as so many decompositions and recompositions of melodrama.

17. In his study, *Kafka in neuer Sicht: Mimik, Gestik und Personengefüge als Darstellungsformen des Autobiographischen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), Hartmut Binder considers Kafka’s represented gestures primarily as expressions of the character’s interiority (117–63), as does Guntermann (50). Although it is limited by the paradigm of psychologically expressive gestures, Binder’s study nevertheless constitutes a useful and detailed analysis of Kafka’s fascination with gestures in his novels as well as in his diary.


25. One of the few critics to have devoted attention to Benjamin’s peculiar relation to the theater is Rainer Nägele, in his fascinating *Theater, Theory, Speculation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991).