

After the Sky Has Fallen: Kafka, Chicken Little and the Big Lie

Richard Block

University of Washington

Chicken Little is the natural heir to Kafka's feckless Country Doctor. The impossible conditions that expose the physician as a quack prepare Chicken Little's coop-mates in 1943 to buy into the Big Lie, i.e. the sky is falling. The falsehood is not what it appears. The sky is not falling because, as Kafka demonstrates, it has already fallen. Nothing is where it should be, all sign systems mislead or lead nowhere, and so-called healers only bring Unheil or disaster. As Disney's 1943 short emphasizes, the country doctor easily metamorphoses into the authoritarian leader using the Big Lie to lead the masses to their death.

Richard Block is a Professor of German Studies at the University of Washington, where he also has affiliate appointments with the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies, the Program in European Studies, and the Program in Global Literary Studies. He is the author of two books, The Spell of Italy: Vacation, Magic, and the Attraction of Goethe (Wayne State UP 2008), and Echoes of a Queer Messianic: From Frankenstein to Brokeback Mountain (SUNY UP 2018). He has also published numerous essays, most recently about Heinrich Heine's messianic history and AIDS.

“Und wir, die an steigendes Glück
denken,
empfänden die Rührung,
die uns beinah bestürzt,
wenn ein Glückliches fällt.”

-Rainer Maria Rilke.

A curious commonplace among many readers of Franz Kafka is to charge him with casual indifference for his apparent lack of horror in response to the Great War. However suited Kafka's narrative tastes might seem to be incorporating the nightmares of WWI, many critics insist his fiction is otherwise engaged (Engel 7-

16; Cornwall 67-76). That is not to ignore Kafka's own attempts to join the army or the army's attempts to conscript him toward the end of WWI, but the desire to enlist hardly stems from nationalist sentiments and more from a sense of obligation, not unlike the peculiar mix of obligation, desire, and whim that underwrites his many failed attempts at marriage (Canetti 5-15). Despite the immensity of the stakes, an emotional detachment and odd calculation often appear to be at play. Without rehearsing again Kafka's many broken engagements, let me propose that Kafka's attempt to find his way—as a husband, as a citizen, as a writer, as a dutiful son—end always in disorientation; his endless tergiversations are the result of always already being shell-shocked. Max Brod used the term to describe the experience of his Prague circle of friends to the outbreak of war, or more specifically, to their experience in the war (Stach 60-62; Posner 207-15). That circle of course would have included Kafka but for his unfitness (bad shoulders) and finally the intervention of his employer near war's end (Stach 60-63). Kafka, arguably, has been shell-shocked ever since he met his father. "Brief an einen Vater" and "Das Urteil" present a subject as traumatized by the father just as painfully as a soldier might be by war.¹ Unable to assert himself and emerge from under the father's shadow, Kafka could be said to look or listen for a calling, for the peal of a bell, or for a mysterious missive from a castle to point the way. In other words, Kafka felt the effects, or rather his fiction registers the effects of war before war was ever declared. He is shellshocked *avant la lettre*, to use a French phrase coined a world-war later.

Hannah Arendt's description of the state of the world in her "Lessingpreis-Rede" of 1959 is helpful here. To be sure, the conditions Arendt describes, coming nearly a half century later, are markedly different from the world Kafka experienced. I use the quote for two reasons: For one, Arendt is referring to the long period since the French Revolution, which does include WWI. And for another, my suggestion is to regard the remark heuristically, as a diagnosis of modernity that aids in exploring Kafka's reaction to the cultural crisis and collapse of all values signaled by the Great War.

The pillars of the best-known truths lie shattered. We need only look around to see that we are standing amid a veritable heap of such pillars. Ever since the failure of the French Revolution we have repeatedly erected the old pillars—only to see them quivering, collapsing anew. The most frightful errors have replaced ‘the best-known truths.’ [...] so that ultimately the public order is based on people holding as self-evident those best-known truths which secretly scarcely anyone still believes in....” (Arendt 10-11)

The doctor’s patient in “Ein Landarzt,” who looks to the healer for help but also knows he is a quack—“My trust in you is very little,” he says—offers a link between Arendt’s diagnosis and the ailments that afflict the doctor in Kafka’s text.² There is nothing left to believe in; the world has imploded. The metaphysical conceits that sustained some kind of measure or means of orientation, such as truth and justice, are exposed as nothing but bluster, a blinding blizzard. To quote Disney’s “Chicken Little” of 1943, the sky has fallen. Called for, then, is a reading of “Ein Landarzt” to map or survey this post-metaphysical terrain after all the pillars of society have collapsed, to expose what things really look like without the figuration that affords the metaphysical illusion to obtain. In a word, a *literal* description. What will especially concern me is how this flattened world creates the conditions for “those best-known truths that we cling to without really believing in them anymore” to prepare the ground for the Big Lie. I will spend most of the essay working through the numerous invitations for interpretation the text solicits only to overlap, feed into, or buttress readings that move in entirely different directions. These include formalist, psychoanalytic, Christian, and Judaic approaches to interpretation. My conclusion will venture to explain the Big Lie by considering Disney’s 1943 short *Chicken Little* in concert with “Ein Landarzt.” I will also include a brief discussion of “In der Strafkolonie” to underscore the necessity but impossibility of reading literally.

The reference to Disney’s *Chicken Little* is hardly frivolous. The conditions that expose the physician as a quack prepare Chicken Little’s coop mates in 1943 to buy into the Big Lie—i.e., the sky *is* falling—denying in essence that it

already has fallen. Chicken Little is the natural heir to Kafka's feckless Country Doctor. The multiple interpretive possibilities fostered by Kafka's text embody the conditions that cultivate desire for a "new" order to restore the good old days when truths were self-evident. In this instance, the country doctor, incapable of healing ("heilen"),³ is replaced by Disney's Foxy Loxy, a false prophet and the deliverer of disaster ("Unheil").

Stumbling out of the Gate

Let me start with what Kafka did say about the war: "Deutschland hat Russland den Krieg erklärt; Nachmittags Schwimmschule" (Kafka 1990, 02.08.1914). The diary entry from 1914 easily serves as evidence of a peculiar detachment, if not indifference. But is that really so? To be sure, wartime is no time for pool parties, but the juxtaposition of the two phrases emphasizes the disconnect between the monumental collapse of a world order and life on the homestead or away from the front.⁴ The brutal and bald contrast between the horrors of the trenches and the eventual mundane indifference of those back home exposes the lack of relatedness or even measure to offer purpose for such massive sacrifice. To speak of swimming lessons after such upheaval is very easily a sign of being shell-shocked.

The entry also accomplishes something readers of Kafka know well: descriptions without affect that stir up rhizomes of allegorical possibilities. For example, the English translation, "Germany invades Russia," misses the mark. To declare War (*erklären*) is also to explain war. Few would argue that if a country is invaded, war is being emphatically explained to its citizens. Learning about war because you are suddenly at war means you either sink or swim. Given how effective or emphatically the Germans have explained to Russians "war"—an invasion will do that—they can be expected to be just as proficient and adept when it comes to explaining swimming. The point I am making is that evidence of WWI registers its effects throughout K's writing as a collapse of all value systems and a loss of any reliable measure. Juxtapositions invite attempts at a metaphorical logic only to refuse them:

We no longer recognize the metaphysical order of things. In spite of all the noise, everyone is dumb and isolated within himself. The interrelation of objective and personal values doesn't function anymore. We live not in a ruined but a bewildered world (Kafka to Gustav Janoch; Janoch 103)

The observation offered by Eric Heller easily follows: "Kafka's world defies any established order and familiar form of understanding. It thus arouses the kind of intellectual anxiety that greedily and compulsively reaches out for interpretation" (Heller 11). As stated above, the grasping for interpretative consistency produces lie after lie, or misreading after misreading, in an attempt to find meaning among the ruins. A psychological reading, for example, may find purchase, but it leaves unexplained or overlooked equally compelling readings, such as theological ones, which are also doubled. What this means, I argue, is that Kafka's text invites such contradictory readings to prevent erection of a true reading (or lie). Underlying these "lies" is a Big Lie, an antisemitic discourse that deploys standard Jewish stereotypes to render them senseless. Like the text itself they lead nowhere, but rather tempt with endless, even contradictory readings that all fall flat.

The only possibility of avoiding production of lies based on unsustainable metaphysical props would be a literal reading of the text, which, if one considers the lessons of "In the Penal Colony," is stubbornly impossible. Literal language is nothing more than scribbles. The sentence of the condemned man is inscribed on his body while death and comprehension of the sentence are said to be simultaneous. The sentence is the sentence. Pure literality.⁵ A language that resists figurative deception kills, but any breathing room or space opened up by the figurative does not guarantee comprehensibility. Convention may impose sense on such uncertainty but as Arendt reminds us, it always falls flat, is meaningless. As the final scene indicates, language is as unreliable as ever. The promise inscribed on the former commandant's gravestone, so tiny that one has to kneel to read it, is a bald lie:

Here rests the Old Commandant. His followers, who are now not allowed to have a name, buried him in this grave and placed this stone. There is a

prophecy that the Commandant will rise again after a certain number of years and from this house will lead his followers to a re-conquest of the colony. Have faith and wait!⁶

The only indication of the old order returning is the need for all interested to drop to one's knees to read the gravestone; that is, in rather awkward fashion to display obeisance and so enact what will never come to pass.

The old commander is not coming back. What is written in stone can only be taken figuratively, in the spirit of prophecy. What returns of the commander, if anything, will be different from what it was. He will perhaps inhabit the spirit of a return, but that return is indicated or rather suggested by nothing more than the curious kneeling of those attending to his memory. What is written in stone is thus literally figurative. The only way what is written in stone deserves to be written in stone or what renders it meaningful is to appeal to figuration which only opens the message to countless interpretations, enabling and disabling the literal at once. It is also what will get a soldier court-martialed and condemned to die.⁷

A helpful realization of this feature of the text—inviting but disabling the literal—is the Japanese anime of the “Landarzt” by Koji Yamamura (2007). While this may seem like a digression, its relevance will become clearer in the concluding section of the essay. Yamamura creates a world from nothing. “Nothing is tethered to a grounding model,” everything is shadowed by its possible metamorphosis, erasure, and resurrection; there is thus no ontology (Levitt 59). Multiple layers are spread flat across a series of images. Everything is inscribed, so it seems, on the surface, including what otherwise would be an interior or personal psychology (Suan 280).

The characters are composed from preexisting codes that exist outside of any particular character; like interpretive strategies they trip or run over one another. Unlike Disney, where characters seem to evolve naturally from an interior core, “inside and outside become blurred (Levitt 59). The execution of each iteration somehow links beyond that localized space of its performance, extending beyond singular characters, episodes...” (Suan 277). This complex predicament in which the self is untethered, persistently metamorphosing into

new amalgamations of pre-existing types, produces a multilayered surface that beckons toward depth or verticality only always to fall flat. The leveled literalness of the world and things can be surveyed only by introducing something figurative.

The compulsion to look up instead of down or ahead results from a compulsion driven by belief in something higher. The Zürau aphorism that begins the anime captures the predicament: “Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen als begangen zu werden” (Kafka Zürau; no. 1). Unable to resist the temptation to gaze onwards and upwards, we stumble, over and over again. While metaphysical illusions, like time tested truths, seek a vessel to revive the fallen, such attempts only result in perpetuation of the “most frightful errors.” The collapsed pillars of society evinced in the anime by its emphasis on a two-dimensional world, maintain their appeal by and as a result of monsters they prop up. Kafka’s father, like all of the fathers referred to in “Brief an den Vater,” manifests that monstrosity.⁸

Falling Flat

The opening sentence of “Ein Landarzt” encapsulates the problem. Consider the pathetic predicament of the country doctor at the beginning of the story. “Er war in grosser Verlegenheit” (252). Just as a dentist (*Zahnarzt*) only deserves such a title if he knows his way around molars and incisors and just as an eye doctor (*Augenarzt*) must know his way around corneas and retinas, so a doctor (**Landarzt**) deserves no medical credential if he is unable to traverse the land. He is no better than an eye doctor or dentist who possesses only book knowledge. After the sky has fallen—evinced by a blinding snowstorm—the country doctor has no way to navigate the land and get to where a patient in need is waiting. So it comes as no wonder that he is embarrassed (*in grosser Verlegenheit*) because he is misplaced, always in the wrong place, “verlegt.” The observation is not simply based on hearing in “Verlegenheit” a partial homophone of “verlegt. The origin of the contemporary meaning of the former comes from Old High German “firlegan” and Middle High German “verlegen, “durch zu langes

Liegen, durch Nichtstun, durch Tändelei in Trägheit versunken” (Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache). In other words, the doctor has remained in the same place too long and is thus overcome with embarrassment, *Verlegenheit*; he is not where he should be and has been where he is too long. So, the question needs to be asked once again, “What kind of country doctor is unable to move, to get going, to traverse the land of which he is the doctor?”

The Judaic-Christian universe has imploded to the point that even a doctor of the land finds that nothing is where it should be, including himself. If we recall the quote from Janoch above, bewilderment ensues since the connections to disparate aspects of one’s life have become unglued. What this also means is that the figuration that inflates the literal or gives language its wings supplies contingency with endless combinatory possibilities. Adumbrating the various interpretive paths solicited and disavowed by the text points to a layering that prepares this flattened terrain to produce out of these endless feints of the text a towering (father) figure, a hoodwinker.

One way to consider how the text welcomes a multitude of readings is to draw on what Thomas Borgstedt calls Kafka’s “Multiperspektivismus” or cubist style of storytelling. “Im *Landarzt* erweist sich die Sprache entsprechend als äußerst verdichtet und rhythmisiert. Worte und Motive unterliegen einer hohen Wiederholffrequenz und bilden gleichsam Linien und Flächen im Text aus” (Borgstedt 61). “Pferd,” for example, appears five times in the first three sentences thus creating a “lexematische Fläche.” Tracing similar sorts of repetitions (“schwenkte,” “Schweinestalls klappte”, “Stalllaterne schwanke”) creates planes of non-semantic thought. Other phrases, such as “ich schüttele den Kopf,” “schwang mich aufs Pferd” create horizontal links and planes. These latter overlapping planes contrast or overlap like a Venn diagram with those created, for example, by “stoßen,” “aufstoßen,” or “mit einem Stoß aus dem Bett” (Borgstedt 63). Such “phenomenological fullness” produces a plethora of interpretive options that stumble over each other. As Gustav Janouch said of Kafka’s drawings, “there is no horizon or horizon of understanding, only a perspective “nach innen” (Janoch 39). The volley I have been describing

between the literal and figurative disperses meaning across multiple planes, but the lack of a stable perspective produces an inward perspective, a reversal of the gaze to collect oneself. In other words, a psychoanalytic reading become irresistible, not least encouraged by Kafka's extensive knowledge of Freud.⁹

How the text perpetuates various perspectives and readings, including the psychoanalytic, is exemplified in the opening paragraph and the entry into a sty. Since nothing is in its proper place but rather "verlegt," horses rather than pigs are housed there. More important is the auto-formation of an additional horse or the doubling of the request. While the request was for one horse, the doctor's repetition of "horse" is understood quite literally; he gets two: "Aber das Pferd fehlte. Das Pferd" (252). This auto-formation of the text is repeated in a doubling of the subject. The doctor is always beside himself; speaking about and speaking are horizontally placed. As shown in the anime, two heads emerge from the doctor's body as he speaks to himself. Doublings and auto formations of the text illustrate a repetition compulsion of the text, its repeated efforts and failures to read the land.

Fake News From Within

Before examining how Judaism and/or Christianity fare in this shell-shocked world, I want to take up the psychoanalytic temptations of the text to lay things out according to a Freudian model as those things come to be flattened and exteriorized by the first-person narrator. Among the most convincing readings is one by Jeffrey Librett. Librett situates the story in familiar territory for Kafka readers: "The story is quintessentially framed and indeed pervaded by the quintessentially Kafkan double impossibility of separating oneself from and connecting with one's home" (Librett 6). Such impossibilities are highlighted throughout Kafka's work—from "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse" who is both a part of and apart from her cohorts to the subject of "Forschungen eines Hundes" who is both part of a pack and separate from it.

Librett draws on that divide to justify reading the story in two parts: the scene in the stable and that in the home of the sick boy. They serve as mirror

images of each other, each one replaying the primal scene which is now multiple. The mother or servant girl is raped by the father. The stable groom is a stand-in for the father indicated by his brutality and his arrogation of power. He provides the doctor with the phallic horses the doctor lacks, only to disempower the doctor anew by sending him off against his will (Librett 7). The doctor in this primal scene is caught between the castrating father and the seductive mother—a predicament repeated with the sick boy whose wound links the son with the perceived rape and castration in the primal scene. “His castration is a reflection of the mother’s as seen by the son faced with the parents’ copulation” (Librett 8). The double bind of the primal scene means that the possibility of leaving that impossible predicament only results in its reiteration.

More than just a font for writing, this dynamic also sponsors interpretations that always are a bit wayward, or given to “stolpern,” stumbling. That the two horses newly discovered in a pig sty are likewise carried away, apparently at the command of the unleashed id or force represented by the groom points to the same wind that inflates the remains of the collapsed heavens around him. That same bluster also accounts for the text’s ability to entertain a reading pegged to Freud’s strategy for interpreting dreams. In “Cracking the Code in a Country Doctor,” Patricia McGurk argues that Kafka intentionally borrowed from Freud’s interpretive strategies far more than anyone has realized and employed those techniques to “deliberately [...] encode homosexuality in a heterosexual text” (McGurk 116). Autoeroticism is the frame that McGurk employs to describe first the dream’s manifest and then its latent content to conclude that Kafka transformed Freud’s own reading of “Durch die Blume” (to speak in a roundabout fashion) “from a white/red scheme of purity vs. sexuality to a homosexual one.” This results in a bloody entanglement of the two. White is now associated with snow and clouds [become] a symbol of semen (McGurk 16). Each word, phrase, or idea has a predominantly heterosexual referent with a subsidiary homosexual one. Drawing on the link between masturbation and homosexuality as well as the slang use of “verlegen” to mean sexually aroused, McGurk produces the following as the “Klartext” that emerges from unpacking the story’s latent content:

Phalluses of (young boys)/rose-red the color of heterosexual or homosexual activity/splattered with the blood of vaginal defloration/of the sperm and blood of anal defloration/moving around inside or outside the vagina or anus. (McGurk 119)

As divergent as these takes on the text might be, they all converge around a back and forth, a repetition expressive of “fort and da.” For McGurk masturbation articulates a back-and-forth rhythm while for others such as Librett it is the endless attempt to leave the psycho-sexual confines of the family only to return time and time again.

Ignorant of the lay of the land or unable to apply his knowledge of it due to the snow and castrated by the father/groom, the quack lands in bed with his sick patient. Once his clothes are removed, he is not just another double of the one he should be attending, but he is also mislaid (“verlegt”): What is a grown man doing in bed with a child? What will they have been up to? If the text stages an endless scene of writing, (Tobias 120-131), then it does so with interpretive strategies that feed into one another; a contagion of interpretive possibilities awaits when the “self” of analysis can’t contain its own readings or keep up with its own performances.

Fake News From God

The metaphysical appeals of the text are suggested by the opening scene in the barn when Rosa comments upon the sudden discovery of two horses in the pig sty: “Man weiß nie, was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat” (253). The humor of the remark is not lost on the servant girl or the country doctor, but their reaction is certainly odd. Has an old saw suddenly been revitalized by their current discovery, rendering it ironic or relevant? What if any is the original context? What is the context now except for a literal one in search of a prophetic or sagacious context? The come-to-Jesus moment—aha, I see—is uproariously funny because it seems just as misplaced as everything else. A most mundane observation acquires exceptional significance because in a world where the sky has fallen everything can come to mean so much. The theological come-ons of

the text, likewise, will prove to be as alluring as the psychoanalytic approaches; they leave unanswered questions whose responses gesture toward other seemingly contrary readings. Before moving to outline those conflicts, let me underscore that it in this world, where the doctor is the embodiment of a fallen man of god and the deflated remains of a priest or wannabe priest, what remains of his congregation are the onlookers through the window of the one to be saved. Without the cover of religion, the congregants are simply riffraff or “Gesindel.”

The Judaic tradition offers another potentially productive path to navigate the text’s opacity, particularly given the text’s resonances with Chasidism. Crudely reduced, Chasidism asserts that when God created the world, he created something other from himself. The Tzimzum of the Kabbala is helpful here. In the Lurianic Kabbalah the term is used to explain the doctrine that God began the process of creation by “contracting” his infinite light (“Ohr Ein Sof”) to allow for a “conceptual space” in which finite and seemingly independent realms could exist (Britannica, “Zim”). That which he abandoned to establish a clearing for creation still has within it flashes of the divine. Humans can overcome that distance, at least temporarily, by releasing the divine spark hidden in all things. Indeed, as Bluma Goldstein noted, such an occurrence appears in the opening scene. At a moment of absolute despair, the ordinary everyday world with nothing more than a kick becomes otherworldly. The horses, described as “uncontrollable” and “unearthly” (*unbeherrschbar*, *unirdisch* [Kafka, “Ein Landarzt,” 256, 261]), dispense with any markers of time and space. One might even link the appearance of two rather than one indicative of the abundance of the divine, a “spenden zum Übermass” (256) (“exorbitant donation”) (Goldstein 749). The doctor’s frustration is not just a result of his inability to cure his patient but a recognition as well that he hasn’t the requisite skills to be what is really required: a Wunder Rabbi. The patient may ask the doctor to attend to his spiritual wounds (“Wirst du mich retten?”; “Will you save me?” 258), but the healing words of this Wunder Rabbi are nothing but foolish fictions exposing the senselessness of his visit. His description of the wound is telling in this regard: “[i]m spitzen Winkel mit zwei Hieben der Hacke geschaffen,” (in a sharp corner

made with two slashes on the side by an axe) (260). The description may carry with it something of the fantastic, but that is hardly a divine spark. Explanations about salvation can only be pure fiction. Moreover, Chasidism rejects any radical division between good and evil; *rosa*, as wound and flower, is both repulsive and beautiful, but the divine spark that would redeem this wound has long extinguished itself. The religious order is flat, and any calls for its revival fall flat.

The impropriety of the naked doctor neatly snuggling up to his patient in bed is not without precedent. There are at least two examples of children being cured when the healer placed himself upon the patient (Goldstein 751). But in this flattened universe, he ends up alongside rather than atop his patient, reenacting how one interpretive field flows into another. To interpret (*auslegen*) is now but an exercise in laying everything out, a surveying that never achieves adequate purchase to gain an overview (“Überblick”). This interpretive excess (*Übermass*) cannot contain itself and welcomes with similar promises of misfortune abundant references to Christian myth.

Let us begin with the transfer of the wound—from Rosa’s cheek to the flank of the young boy. The transfer is itself descriptive of metaphor. Metaphor, as we know, comes from the Greek “meta-for-ein” or to carry over, but when the skies have fallen, carrying over merely collects the rubble left in the wake of a windstorm. The failure of the name “rose” or its failed symbolism exemplifies these tectonic shifts of the text’s surveyable terrain, whereas the wound recalls Jesus’s wound, positioning the boy as a martyr to the failed healing powers of the quack now lying beside him. But if Jesus’s wound is understood to be the site of Christian rebirth, in this collapsed universe all that rebirth can portend is being reborn from vermin as flies. Things can get wings not to ascend in glorious reunion with God but to feast on their own vomit. Take away the wrappings of religion and the wound is unredeemable vermin. But even the source of the infestation is questionable. Well into the 20th century maggot therapy was used to cure stubborn ulcers (Sherman 618-20). Wonder rabbis and priests have been replaced by maggots whose secreted enzymes dissolve the flesh to consume it. Jesus’s transfiguration is nothing more than the product of vermin labor.

Naked and exposed, the doctor's munificence quickly becomes self-interest. His "Ehrenwort" (260) is invoked to prop up what is certainly as shocking a claim as any in the text: "Viele bieten ihre Seite an und hören kaum die Hacke im Forst, geschweige denn, daß sie ihnen näher kommt" ("Many offer their side and hardly hear the axe in the forest, not to mention that it nears them") (260). Just whose side is the doctor on? His explanation is as meaningless as his diagnosis is unhinged. The idea of offering one's side for no apparent reason or for a sacrifice without purpose recalls the failed saw or aphorism above upon discovery of two horse in a pig sty. The words hardly function as metaphor or only as one without any purchase. All musings about sacrifice in the name of the axe only inspire the doctor to do the opposite, to think only of his own rescue or saving ("Rettung"). The fully naked or exposed doctor is not interested in soul searching or soul saving, but rather only in saving his own hide, which likewise will be exposed to the elements once the wild horses take off for nowhere.

The scene is one of a world fallen out of grace. The wound lacks any mystical qualities to excuse its gross appearance. A naked doctor lying next to his patient is in no position to heal, even with the aid of maggots. The congregation cum riffraff nonetheless retains expectations impossible for the doctor to meet. Who can make whole or holy a body when cures ("Heilmittel") are means with no end? That doesn't mean the doctor ought not be offed, but his killing is hardly a sacrifice offered to appease a deity or save humanity but rather is merely the disposal of a feckless physician in order to satisfy a congregation's blood lust.

Entkleidet ihn, dann wird er heilen,/Und heilt er nicht, so tötet ihn!

"S ist nur ein Arzt, 's ist nur ein Arzt."

(Undress him, then he will heal. /And if he doesn't heal, kill him.

It's only a doctor, it's only a doctor (269).

Even if he is not asked to walk on water or turn water into wine, he must perform the impossible to secure a right to life. After the heavens have imploded, the savior is just a physician. That does not, however, relieve him of responsibility.

The plea for a doctor with the gifts of a messiah persists even if such hope springs only from hopelessness.

But the choir is not finished: “Freuet Euch, Ihr Patienten, / Der Arzt ist Euch ins Bett gelegt” (“Rejoice, all you patients. The doctor’s laid in bed beside you”) (261). If this second recital signals a shift in their demeanor or wishes for the doctor, the apparent joy of the doctor lying next to “you” is much ado about nothing. The doctor is hardly prepared to sacrifice himself. Further, rather than risen (which traditionally would be cause for singing) he has lain down, gone from wannabe healer to at best a sympathetic double for all who suffer. In this context, the congregation merely seems like Christmas carolers with nothing to herald. Hark the herald angels! But the only harking is easily a barking, a chanting that hangs in the air to celebrate what is remarkable only because it is performed as if they were a monumental event to harken. It may be performed as if presaging a miracle, but in the end it is just noise. How could one possibly sing joy to this world?

Jews and the Big Lie

The doctor is certainly in his rights to bemoan the “Fehlläuten” that calls him to perform the impossible. “Betrayed! Betrayed. A false alarm of the night bell, once answered, it cannot be made good, ever” (261). All heralding sings of a non-event, a “non-Ereignis.” The bell tolls for no one because there is NO bell, just bells or bell sounds detached from an absolute measure to standardize what they would call out. Their sounds are out of tune. There is no absolute of any sort to reference for harmony’s sake. That is to say, “es fehlt” (“it is missing”) (261). But wayward winds, in need of something to buffet about, with no pillars of society to channel their movements, don’t cease blowing. In the end, the defrocked country doctor is whisked away without time to dress and shield himself from the elements. He is destined to wander the country forever—never getting back to where he started from, never returning home. He is a wandering Jew. He may not have taunted Jesus on the way to the cross, as the mythical Wandering Jew was said to have done, but his babbling and hollow reassurances perform a

similar function. If the Wandering Jew had hope—Jesus could come a second time and end his travail—for the country doctor no such possibility is fathomable. The site of rebirth has been usurped by maggots. No hope to an end of his suffering is possible. Perhaps, as some kind of perverse consolation, he is not cursed to walk the earth, but rather to be jerked around, chauffeured by two wild horses who don't know the difference between a pig sty and a stable.

Metaphor, to repeat, merely collects the rubble and remains left in the wake of a windstorm. Its failure to take flight doesn't preclude metonymy from posing as metaphor. Disney's 1943 "Chicken Little" is proof of that. The short draws on Nazi propaganda techniques to convince Chicken Little's coop mates that the sky is falling: first by repeating a Big Lie over and over, then by discrediting with ad hominem attacks the voice of reason. Evidence of the sky's falling is a piece of painted scrap wood that Foxy Loxy drops on the head of Chicken Little and then a yellow star that falls on the now discredited naysayer or person of reason. After succumbing to the tricks of the Nazi playbook the entire coop of chickens is exhorted by the voice from above or Foxy Loxy to lock themselves in a cave that allows Foxy Loxy to feast on all of them. What stands in for sky works to literalize a metaphor. The falling of the sky produces the conditions for the Big Lie. But what are those conditions and how is it that the Big Lie does not simply fall flat in much the same manner as the interpretive teases cited throughout the essay?

Material proof is required. Nothing suggestive like a wound that reads any way the wind blows can anchor such a wild claim. Interpretive possibilities must be contained. But any read on the world, the land, or being stumbles over its own interpretive strategies or aspirations for approval from above. Literal proof is required, much like the snowball brought into Congress by Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe to contest climate change (Mirsky). But as "In the Penal Colony" reminds us, literality is illegible or legible only in terms of the figural, which, to repeat, is unsustainable. After all, snowballs melt. In terms of this text the land must be made readable again (*es muss sich auslegen lassen*), which, in these blinding, blizzard conditions, is impossible. Since the lack of any suitable

purchase for an overview disables the claims of metaphor, then the question must be asked, however obvious: can the sky really fall?

While a collapse of all value systems might make of the phrase a telling metaphor, metaphor melts into air; it cannot sustain its claim. What that does, however, is prepare the ground for metonymy, something solid but as simple as a clunky yellow star, to misrepresent itself, manufacture or fabricate metaphorical and metaphysical significance. The danger of such fabrications extends to basic facts. Discarded metal can read as a heavenly fragment, a message sent from above. To cite the startling turn of phrase used by a former White House press secretary, there are now alternate facts (Bradner). A blinding blizzard produces empirical uncertainty. But as Foxy Loxy's guidebook *Psychology* instructs, metonymy's lies must be bold and brazen: "If you're going to tell a lie, make it a big one." Incessant repetition of a grossly empirical falsehood is the remaining, albeit specious, measure of authenticity. But to just assert that the Big Lie wins followers because it manufactures outlandish facts and repeats them does not satisfy.

Every claim of Kafka's text elicits counterclaims, clearing the terrain for a lie premised on universal denial of meaning, including facts. But again, what is the big lie that underwrites Kafka's text insofar as the text itself is the aftermath of the sky's collapse? Even if we imagine a tyrannical father to forge alternative facts and demand acceptance of this other "truth," it still cannot explain how the text prepares for verification and acceptance of bald falsehoods. What I have just rehearsed with respect to the Big Lie captivating Chicken Little does not carry over so easily to Kafka's text which already exposes that the sky has fallen. To connect the text with Disney something more is required. The Disney short pretends that what has already happened is about to happen. Is it possible that Kafka's text as well is underwritten by a Big Lie that works to discredit all readings, proposing in its stead an overarching, more compelling falsehood?

Reworking the Arendt quote from above begins to open up the sky for a clearer view of the workings of the Big Lie: *After all the pillars of society have collapsed [with the outbreak of the Great War], the most frightful error [...]*

replace[s] the best-known truths and holds as self-evident [anything that hits you over the head]. While Arendt continued that such truths have hardly any believers, the Nazis and Disney discovered, nonetheless, that everyone still believes in the sky.

In essence, the lie is about materializing the sky. One way to understand what is meant by “materializing” the sky is to return to the differences noted above between anime and Disney. Disney presents character as stable, integrated, and possessing a core. Such a lie, if I may call it that, would partake of the same logic that makes of all Jews a vicious stereotype. That is, for a racist ideology to obtain the target of one’s attacks must have all the stable, identifiable, reliable traits of a Disney character, such as Chicken Little and Foxy Loxy. Nothing of the sort, as my rather exhaustive rehearsals of the ever-changing character of the text reveals, appears to meet that criterion. That does not mean that the world, flat as it is, does not call out for conceptualization. Foxy Loxy’s rehearsal of Nazi propaganda tactics underscores that desire, as does its success. And discrediting voices of reason is not unlike the countervailing interpretations sponsored by the text. The Nazi playbook used by Foxy Loxy is instructive when we consider that its organizing principle is antisemitism. Stated otherwise, does Kafka’s text anticipate and preclude the gamesmanship of Foxy Loxy’s *Psychology*? And if so, how?

Instructive here is McGurk’s insistence that Kafka relied far more on Freudian interpretive strategies than is generally recognized. In the instance cited above, the result was a deliberate encoding of homosexuality in a heterosexual text. Insofar as the social discourse of the time, as underscored by McGurk, connected Jews to homosexuality and effeminacy, it is worth examining how Kafka worked with the racial discourses of the time to explore dream-like possibilities to disable such topoi. Sander Gilman’s “A Dream of Jewishness Denied: Kafka’s Tumor and ‘Ein Landarzt’” walks one through the stubborn stereotypes about Jews that “were standard[s] of the medical and popular discourse of the time” (Gilman, *Dream* 256). “Ein Landarzt,” in fact, should be read as the wish fulfillment of a dream that erases or rather displaces the markers

of Jewish difference. Kafka, at least as far as dreams are concerned, not only knew Freud but also was aware of its power to shape his “waking” or even woke world: “Ich kann nicht schlafen. Nur Träume kein Schlaf” (Gilman, “Dream” 263). In this waking dream “all of the images Kafka uses deal with a complex of cultural fantasies about Jews and “Jewish diseases and degeneracy” (Gilman, “Dream” 275). What astounds and baffles in the tale results from the texture of his waking dream work intended to both display and uproot the racial stereotypes dominating the medical and social discourse of the time. That is, the racial references are removed and displaced, revealing as they dissemble. Take, for example, the bite on Rosa’s cheek and the rose like wound in the patient’s body. The bite in Rosa’s cheek, according to Gilman, becomes the festering tumor in the groin of the sick patient. Such a migration disavows the shaky ground upon which any and even all racial stereotypes are erected. If they are mobile or easily attributed to others, then they lose traction and are readily assigned to everyone and all. The patient’s wound, Gilman continues, “is a vision of a cancerous lesion as well as a syphilitic one, at least in its provenance” (Gilman, “Dream” 274). The wound in the groin is the sign of illness, a perverse sexuality, and disease; it marks the overdetermined triangulation of Jewish difference in vogue at the time. On the basis of the pseudo-science of race, it indicts the Jew who would assimilate. “Only in the acculturated Jew (read: Franz Kafka) did the signs of diseases (read: tumors, cancer, tuberculosis, and syphilis) become immediately evident, for those Jews had shed their supposed [genetic] immunity as they left ritual behind them” (Gilman, “Dream” 270). Kafka’s dream scatters the supposed markers of the Jew across an unreadable landscape. And if that unreadability questions the legitimacy of the country doctor’s title, it also puts in play the social, racialized understanding of the Jew as a physician; is he truly a doctor, or a Wunder rabbi, or a quack, or a double for the sick patient? Of course, he is all of the above and none of the above. The Jew is everywhere and nowhere.

The nomadic character of the country doctor or *Landarzt* is performed through a complex of floating signifiers which resist any fixed reading. That does not mean their traces cannot be tracked, even if interpretive leads go everywhere

and nowhere. The example of the wound is one such marker, as Gilman argues. Quite fittingly, the foot, the Jewish foot is another. The cloven foot of the devil and its association with disease extended in the Middle Ages to the Jew, whose feet, looks, and gestures were thought to confirm them as a contagion of disease and an instrument of the devil (Gilman, "The Jewish Body" 589). By Kafka's time the foot remained a locus of Jewish deficiency, but this time as a disqualification to serve the nation as one of its foot soldiers, thus precluding integration into German society at large (Gilman, "The Jewish Body" 589). The country doctor's feet are mentioned only for what they do not accomplish. As his forlorn patient protests, "Du bist ja auch nur irgendwo abgeschüttelt, kommst nicht auf eigenen Füßen" ("You were shaken out from somewhere, you don't arrive on your own feet") as the doctor is dragged by head and feet into the bed of his patient, as if to confirm that his body, or at least his feet, are compromised or "sick" (Gilman, "Dream" 274). That fancy footwear can hide the defect, speaks on the one hand, to the dilemma of the Jew would be German; no matter how integrated they may be, an indelible invisible difference remains. On the other, it confirms Kafka's strategy to de-racialize the text. That such traces remain means such canards can still find purchase if they are anchored to a particular signified and exclude equally productive connotations. That is, the Big Lie of the Jewish body holds the sky in place long enough to propose that is falling in Chicken Little. The conflation of "Jew" as both a religious and racial category, the knotting of religion and pseudo-science/sociology appears impervious to the voices of reason that would have one interpretive approach undone by another. The "Jew" is the lie that underwrites all possible readings.¹⁰ Jews are all things bad. It is the fiction that never stops giving. All we have, according to Gilman, are traces of images "Kafka hoped to distance himself from" (Gilman, "Dream" 270). Disavowing any interpretive conclusions, the text enacts only to disavow all meaning that issues from what we might call its unconscious or what we might call its Jewish character. (Along these lines, unqualified support for Israel in the U.S. often comes from the ultra-conservatives who are happy political bedfellows with neo-

Nazis. In other words, Jews are the lynchpin in an imaginary world order underwritten by Nazi sympathizers.)

Stated otherwise, Kafka cannot write a flat text, a text that resists partaking of metaphysical conceits, as the example above from *In the Penal Colony* demonstrates. What he does instead is deploy antisemitic topoi or triggers that give rise to a plethora of readings that disown their claims to truth by being overtaken, overruled by others. He takes the wind out of the sails of such topoi. To recall a distinction made by Roland Barthes and further refined by D.A. Miller, they connote rather than denote:

The signifier of denotation is constituted by a sign or system of primary signification; meaning is self-evident. Connotation, or how the language of and about homos [read: Jews] circulates without any primary signification, “manifest[s] certain semiotic insufficiency. It can’t help appearing doubtful, debatable, possible a mere effluvium of rumination . . . fond of discovering in what must be read what need not be read into it.” (Miller 125)

On-going scholarly fascination with the text and the conflicting claims they propose—even as they overlap—attest to the explanatory power of Barthes’s distinction. The substitution of “Jew” for “homos” both confirms and confuses the stereotype undone by McGurk. The overabundance of interpretive possibilities means that what would be marked as ‘Jewish’ intermixes with other semiotic elements. It becomes, as Gilman argues, the dream of a Jew seeking assimilation. And while such dreams end in delusion and disillusion, they nonetheless retain the potential to disable the Big Lie so long as they don’t seek and acquire semiotic sufficiency.

To summarize, Kafka disables the semiotic field that would produce the stereotypical Jew. Attempts to forge such an image are subject to the same fate as any of the readings discussed above. Adding to layers of prevarication that inform the idea of the “Jew” is the assumption that Jews are impervious to history; their character never changes. The Big Lie allows the text to make sense of a landscape that otherwise cannot be made sensible. Staging the Big Lie,

however, exposes the contingent nature of all meaning, disabling any attempt to make sense of a senseless world after the pillars of society have fallen. Staging, purposely invoking what Gilman identifies as traces, doesn't allow interpretation to get anywhere, to propose any sort of progress. Rather than disabling any reading, rehearsing and parodying the Big Lie makes all reading possible but any one reading impossible. The Big Lie, of course, would have it otherwise. It imposes order on a world out of joint. "Die Lüge wird zur Weltordnung gemacht" ("The lie is made into a world order"; Kafka, "Der Process" 389). After the sky has fallen the only directive possible is to wander without purpose and hope, to create a path...to nowhere. To do otherwise is to fall victim to the Big Lie, to mimic Disney's sitting ducks, who, unable to fly the coop, will have their heads served on a platter to a fraudster who would be sent by God.

¹ The father's command to him at the end of "Das Urteil" to die by drowning is the clearest indication of a submerged self, unable to emerge from the shadow of the father.

² "Mein Vertrauen zu dir ist sehr gering" (Kafka, "Ein Landarzt," 259).

³ "Unheil" brings to light the meaning of "heilen" as healing both physically and spiritually.

⁴ It is the same disconnect that Erich Maria Remarque would detail after the war in *Im Westen nichts Neues* to question why anyone would fight for one's country.

⁵ The English is instructive here, since "sentence" can mean both the punishment and the grammatical unit (Kafka, "In der Strafkolonie," 212).

⁶ "Hier ruht der alte Kommandant. Seine Anhänger, die jetzt keinen Namen tragen dürfen, haben ihm das Grab gegraben und den Stein gesetzt. Es besteht eine Prophezeiung, dass der Kommandant nach einer bestimmten Anzahl von Jahren auferstehen und aus diesem Hause seine Anhänger zur Wiedereroberung der Kolonie führen wird. Glaubet und wartet!" (Kafka 1944, 247).

⁷ The officer's refusal to allow for the accused to offer a defense is not as absurd, at least theoretically, as it might seem. Once gradations and nuances surrounding offenses are introduced—as they must be lest all crime be regarded as the same crime—there is no end to them. There are several degrees of murder, of manslaughter, larceny, rape, etc. Insanity is permanent or temporary. The making of distinctions threatens to become infinite and arbitrary, or at least productive of confusion for the judge or jury. The accused or condemned refused to rise on the hour during the night to salute the door of the officer. His failure to obey the command might be a matter of sloth or an understanding of the command as figurative, not meant to be taken literally. The accused, having failed the spot check of his superior, does seem to have understood the necessity of taking commands literally, as he is whipped by the commandant for

his dereliction of duty. Instead of rising to protest, he grabs the commandant's legs and acts like the dog to which both the whip and the nonsensical order reduced him.

⁸ The opening passage of "Brief an den Vater" encapsulates the problem in the relationship: "Du hast mich letztthin einmal gefragt, warum ich behaupte, ich hätte Furcht vor Dir. Ich wußte Dir, wie gewöhnlich, nichts zu antworten, zum Teil eben aus der Furcht, die ich vor Dir habe, zum Teil deshalb, weil zur Begründung dieser Furcht zu viele Einzelheiten gehören, als daß ich sie im Reden halbwegs zusammenhalten könnte. Und wenn ich hier versuche, Dir schriftlich zu antworten, so wird es doch nur sehr unvollständig sein, weil auch im Schreiben die Furcht und ihre Folgen mich Dir gegenüber behindern und weil die Größe des Stoffs über mein Gedächtnis und meinen Verstand weit hinausgeht." "Recently, you asked why I insist that I am afraid of you. I was, as usual, unable to answer, partly out of fear and partly because an explanation would mean going into far more details than I could keep straight. And if I try now to give you a response in writing, it will be quite incomplete, because the fear of writing and the consequences of such present a barrier, because the magnitude of the subject exceeds my memory and power of reason" (trans. mine) (Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II* 143).

⁹ As he wrote to Milena Jesensak: "I consider the therapeutic part of psychoanalysis to be a hopeless error. All these so-called illnesses are matters of faith, efforts of souls in distress to find meanings in some maternal soil" (Kafka, *Letters to Milena* 246-7). A nod to the father, perhaps, but maternal soil signals a pull away from the father that the traumatized son, as we will now see, cannot abide. (Also see Marson and Leopold 146-150.)

¹⁰ A survey of stereotypes of Jews reveals unresolvable contradictions. Jews are avaricious capitalists but also Bolsheviks; Jewish men are effeminate but also sexual predators; Jews are Zionists but also internationalists; Jews are parochial but also cosmopolitan, etc. For a quick but helpful history of anti-semitism, see the Britannica entry on the concept.

Works Cited

- Borgstedt, Thomas. "Kafkas kubistisches Erzählen: Multiperspektive und Intertextualität in 'Ein Landarzt.'" In *Kafka verschrieben*, ed. Irmgard Wirtz. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010. 53-96.
- Bradner, Eric. "Conway: Trump White House offered 'alternative facts' on crowd size," <https://cnn.com> (January 23, 2017), accessed September 10, 2025.
- Canetti, Elias. *Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*. New York: Schocken, 1974.
- Cohn, Dorrit. Kafka's Eternal Present: Narrative Tense in "Ein Landarzt" and Other First-Person Stories. *PMLA* 83: 1 (March 1968): 144-150.
- Cornwall, Mark. "The First World War" in *Franz Kafka in Context*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

-
- Encyclopaedia Britannica (<https://britannica.com>), accessed September 10, 2025 (“Antisemitism”; “Tzimtzum”).
- Engel, Manfred and Richie Robertson. *Prague and the First World War*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012.
- Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. Das Wortauskunftssystem zur deutschen Sprache in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, <<https://www.dwds.de/>>, accessed September 10, 2025 (“Verlegenheit”).
- Geronimi, Clyde. *Chicken Little* (director). Walt Disney Productions.
- Gilman, Sander. “A Dream of Jewishness Denied: Kafka’s Tumor and ‘Ein Landarzt.’” In *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka*, ed. James Rolleston. New Jersey: Camden, 2002. 263-325.
- _____. “The Jewish Body: A Footnote.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*: 64: 4 (Winter 1990): 588-602.
- Goldstein, Bluma. Franz Kafka’s ‘Ein Landarzt: A Study in Failure.’ *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 42 (special issue) (1968): 745-59.
- Heller, Erich. *Franz Kafka*. New York: The Viking Press, 1974.
- Janoch, Gustav. *Conversations with Kafka*. Trans. Goronwy Rees. Cambridge: New Directions: 2012.
- _____. *Gespräche mit Kafka. Erinnerungen und Aufzeichnungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1951
- Kafka, Franz. “Brief an den Vater.” *Kritische Ausgabe. Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*. Ed. Jost Schillement. Frankfurt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994.
- _____. “Ein Landarzt.” *Kritische Ausgabe. Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch, Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994. 252-261.
- _____. “In der Strafkolonie.” *Kritische Ausgabe. Drucke zu Lebzeiten*. Eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch, Gerhard Neumann. Frankfurt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994.
- _____. *Letters to Milena*. Trans. Philip Boehm. New York: Schocken, 2015.
- _____. *Der Prozess*. Projekt Gutenberg. Berlin: Die Schmiede, 1925
- _____. *Tagebücher*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990.
- _____. *The Zürau Aphorisms of Franz Kafka*. New York: Schocken, 2006.
- Librett, Jeffrey. “‘With These Repulsive Things Indissolubly Bound’: Kafka as Primal Scene.” *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* 64.4 (Winter 2007): 513-33.

-
- Levitt, Deborah. *The Animation Apparatus: Animation Vitality, and the Futures of the Image*. Winchester: Zero books, 2018.
- Marson, Eric, and Keith Leopold. "Kafka, Freud, and 'Ein Landarzt.'" *German Quarterly* 37.2 (March 1964): 146-160.
- McGurk, Patricia. "Cracking the Code in 'A Country Doctor': Kafka, Freud and Homotextuality. In Pereira, Frederico, ed. *Literature and Psychology*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, 1995. 111-119.
- Miller, D. A. "Anal Rope." *Representations* 32.1: 114-33.
- Mirsky, Steve. "Climate Skeptic Senator Burned after Snowball Stunt." *Scientific American* (March 2015), Podcast.
- Sherman, Ronald A. "Insects in Medicine" In *Encyclopedia of Insects*. 2nd ed. Academic Press, 2009: 618-20.
- Suan, Stevie. *Anime's Identity: Performativity and Form Beyond Japan*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.
- Tobias, Rochelle. "A Doctor's Odyssey: Sickness and Health in Kafka's 'Ein Landarzt'". *Germanic Review* 75.2 (Spring 2000): 120-31.
- Yanamura, Koji. *Kafka: Ein Landarzt*. Production: Yamamura Animation and Schochiku.