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Kafka and Weil: Self-shedding and decreativity in our writing practices

Abstract:

All writers turn their backs on the world, in a sense, when they sit at the desk, and they also forget themselves in the act of writing. Some writing practices are more overtly connected to renunciation. Contemporaries Franz Kafka and Simone Weil both held renunciative conceptions of their ambitions and expression: 'self-shedding' and 'decreation' respectively. Kafka sought this primarily through a writing practice that he described at times as redemption, penance and prayer; Weil's approach included contemplative reading and writing practices, Christian prayer and political activism. Decreativity – a strange word but an age-old idea – makes it possible to see fragmented, difficult and sometimes pathologised writing and writers in another light. Through three short works by Kafka – "At Night", "Two Antagonists" and the aphorism "A cage went in search of a bird" – this article contemplates decreativity in our writing and reading practices, laying the groundwork for a radical reconsideration of their scope and value.

Biographical note:

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> If there is one doctrine to which Simone Weil held unswervingly it is that of decreation, of disincarnation . . . a spiritual act devastating the "I" in us, a stripping away and renunciation . . . communion with the infinite: and Grace.
> G. A. Panichas, *The Simone Weil Reader*

Introduction

Prior to the act of writing, there is the desire to write. This is not necessarily a drive for 'self-expression' or even a desire to produce writing. For some, it can be a response to the experience of *not writing* as untenable. The world in which our writing is *not done* is an unchanged world or self, which we may attempt to redress, renounce or redeem by sitting at the desk. Our writing practice may then become a habitual shedding of the selfish self – that 'I' famously eschewed by Annie Ernaux. Franz Kafka called this *self-shedding*, the renouncing of self (*Selbstabschüttelung*) that was involved for him in being a writer (Kafka, 1977, pp. 333–35). In a less writerly context, the well-known French philosopher Simone Weil, a contemporary of Kafka's, wrote of *decreation* and viewed it as no less than an ontological necessity [1]. According to Weil, "We are born far below zero. Zero is our maximum" (Vetö, p. 22). For this reason, as Philosopher Miklós Vetö explains, she saw a positive intensification and elevation in our approaching zero, reducing the degree by which we have fallen short of our "nothingness" (p. 22). Decreativity may best be understood in connection to renunciation for the greater good. From a religio-philosophical context, Weil viewed this decreation of self as the human vocation (p. 11). Here, I put forward (for the first time, as far as I am aware) that this same decreativity, this 'vocation', was also Kafka's and that he lived it through his writing practice, and realised it powerfully through his brief works. This article explores the possibility of a renunciative, decreative writing practice by allowing Weil's conception of decreation to illuminate a few of Kafka's brief writings – "At Night", "Two Antagonists" and the aphorism "A cage went in search of a bird" – via literal-minded thought experiments. As an act, decreativity sidesteps the cult of personality, while retaining personhood. The concept of decreativity in context allows us to reconstrue the famously pathologised writerly struggle. While writing seems like an isolating or alienating practice, each piece of writing is intended as a space for at least two people; it also sets out for the communal good of connecting people who are separated in space and time. The perceived idiosyncrasies of the 'tortured genius' may be signs of strain produced by the absence of public participation in what should be a shared effort.

Kafka and Weil

Though this article does not focus on biography, there is a notable synergy between Kafka and Weil. Kafka was twenty-six when Weil was born in 1909; Weil was fifteen when Kafka died at the age of forty, and she herself died at thirty-four. Both were victims of tuberculosis who left behind copious unpublished notebooks and letters that prove beyond reasonable doubt that their preoccupations were full-time. Neither writer was well-published during their lives. Their works are meditative and directly engaged with deep-rooted enquiries; in their secular, modernist environments – Kafka returning home from the Insurance office and Weil from her post as a school teacher or from the Renault factory – it was natural to them to sit down and

write of Abraham, the Fall and Pythagoras, picking up conversations with Jerusalem and Ancient Greece as though only momentarily interrupted. Both often wrote in fragments that present the writing act as a form of thinking – pure process. What separates them? Among other things: Kafka is known for his literature, Weil for her philosophical and spiritual thinking. Yet much, if not all, of Kafka's work could be read philosophically and spiritually, and Weil was a powerful writer whose prose style, as Joan Dargan (1999) argues, may have more to do with her legacy than is usually supposed.

The legacies of both are complicated by cults of personality and strong doses of pathologisation: Weil is commonly described as extreme, harsh and self-denying (one wonders: *for a woman?*); Kafka, more often than not, is portrayed as the emblem of a tortured and self-doubting individual (one wonders: *for a man?*); both are sometimes posthumously blamed for starving themselves, as though their personalities were responsible for their deaths (martyrdom, self-starvation) – despite the brutal and unassailable fact of tuberculosis's closing of the throat. While their work is lauded, their practices and outlooks are frequently held in suspicion: any survey of media, including the scholarly literature, indicates that people are not able or not willing to discuss the writings of Kafka and Weil without personality-related reservations [2]. To throw off some of this baggage while retaining an interest in the practices of writers and thinkers, I suggest that one of Weil's most important preoccupations – decreativity – can (and should) illuminate a valuable aspect of Kafka's writing. It can help us think about what Kafka may have intended by his 'self-shedding' – a drive less directly perceptible in the 'Kafkaesque' (and, in his own opinion, burnable) novels but powerfully present in his short pieces, fragments and aphorisms. These brief works, largely neglected in comparison with the novels and *Metamorphosis,* can be read as records of a writing process that could be, in Weil's sense of the word, truly decreative; that is, a writing practice that the quotidian self obstructs (just by existing), so that by repeatedly engaging with this practice, another will than one's own ordinary will is at work.[3] Writing, as a decreative practice, creates opportunities (or obligations) to abstain from who we are when we are not writing.

Renunciation, obligation and expression

For both Kafka and Weil, some type of renunciation was obligatory. This *Selbstabschüttelung* of Kafka's was to reduce the already excessive and unbearable, to try to open out a small space in which something new can enter and radically change everything. We think of Kafka's ears stuffed with wool and his vegetarian's promise to *not eat* as many animals as his butchering ancestors had killed; we think of Weil quitting teaching to work in the Renault factory and refusing to eat more than a soldier's rations. This ambition to renounce is easily ridiculed, like the writing life itself, and also the life of the soul. Kafka, now, might be called a granola cruncher or be arrested for vegan protesting, and Weil might be in hospital for anorexia and diagnosed with delusions of grandeur – or vice versa. Renunciation is associated with social or religious causes and, in that sense, is opposed to self-focused concepts, such as self-improvement, wellness [of the self] and mindfulness [of self and its surrounds] – and we could add to this the concept of self-expression. In viewing Kafka as expressionist, Stanley Corngold (1988) writes: "My understanding of Kafka's fiction is of an enterprise that aims to engage to

the limit the being wholly centred on writing" (p. 295). From the literal perspective of practice, it is hard to imagine a writer working in any other way. Yet though we may expect a creative practice to be demanding (or artists to be eccentric) we lack a context for renunciation through idiosyncratic writing practices. Kafka (2007) himself saw the strangeness in his being "occupied only with an eccentric writing that aims at nothing else than the salvation or damnation of his own soul" (p. 212). I contend that there is strong religio-philosophical context for this writing practice through decreativity and its own links to conceptions of selfhood and divinity in antiquity.

In the background of Weil's conception of decreation, there are echoes of divine precedent: Plato's *Theaetetus* suggests that the human vocation is to become like God, not through attaining power but by fleeing from the evil of the self and the world (176b). The concepts of *imitatio Dei* and *imitatio Christi* are complex conceptions of divinity and selfhood and their relation, underpinned by divine self-sacrifice. In Christian theology, this connects to kenosis, God's own act of renouncing the divine nature, from Greek *kenos* ('empty'), with biblical allusion to Greek *heauton ekenōse* (literally 'emptied oneself', Phil. 2:7 Greek New Testament & ESV). From Weil's notebooks, Vetö (1994) explores how the creativity of God is renunciative, a blueprint for our own decreative vocation:

> If one accepts that beings have an existence independent of our imagination, then one imitates the sacrifice of God in creation: he renounced being everything and made room for other beings." To act in this way signifies that "[w]e participate in the creation of the world in decreating ourselves by ourselves". (pp. 22–23; see also pp.11–12.)

In the seemingly demiurgic creation of texts and interpretations, writers and readers may imagine literary production as a concatenation of powerful and self-assertive acts. We may also imagine a solitary, passive place in literature to enjoy the privilege of encountering other beings without being encountered. To consider our literary engagements through Weil's conception of decreativity is to fundamentally reconsider if we participate in literature for reinforcement of the status quo, or to seek ways to be interrupted and even broken down by the needs of others, thereby making room for those others in the self and in the real world.

On a personal level, what is at stake in decreation or self-shedding goes beyond literary ambitions. Kafka wrote in his diary:

> This tremendous world I have inside of me. How to free myself, and this world, without tearing myself to pieces. And rather tear myself to a thousand pieces than be buried with this world within me. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is quite clear to me. (Kafka, 1988b, p. 222).

In a strikingly similar passage from a letter to her student, and in reference to her own writing project, Weil wrote:

> It is a great sorrow for me to fear that the thoughts that have descended into me should be condemned to death through the contagion of my inadequacy and wretchedness. I never read the story of the barren fig tree without trembling. I think that is a portrait of me. In it also, nature was powerless, and yet it was not excused. (Weil, 1991, p. 100)

In both cases, there is a clear separation between the work that is to be done and the self that is called upon to do it. Kafka is not the world he bears; Weil is not the thoughts that descended into her. Weil evokes the parable of the fig tree from which Jesus wanted fruit and which he cursed – though it was not the season for figs (ESV, Mark 11:12). She suggests that her writing project is like the fruit desired from her by God, a means of redemption through the satisfaction of a divine hunger. In both cases, salvation or liberation is contingent upon expression, but not 'self-expression'. For Kafka and Weil, in these examples, the expression required of them is felt as obligatory, a separation from oneself like fruiting and birthing. Though this 'work' is carried within one, this does not imply that it arises there; even if it did not 'descend' into one, like genetic material or a divine vision, it makes itself known in the very problem of its *not being done*. There is the fear that the self will become the grave for this writing if it is not liberated in time. At times, the process goes well, as when Kafka (1976) was composing "The Judgement"; he felt that "the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved my own weight on my back" (p. 276). The stakes were high: writing, for him, brought "happiness only if I can raise the world into the pure, the true, and the immutable" (Kafka, 1988b, p. 386–387).

In the simple act of turning from the world to face the page, the writer learns to shed the old self-world nexus of the past. Though it seems as though a writer isolates and produces work *for* the world (as they may), their private work may also be in this act of partial disappearance or renunciation, which brings about the new, and also invites the presence of others.

Towards a camp in the open: "At Night"

To imagine Kafka writing his brief work "At Night" (Kafka, 2011, p. 436) is to imagine Kafka writing his brief work at night – as we know that he did. On the grounds of this literalism, I propose a thought experiment in which we know nothing about Kafka other than that he is sitting at a desk in his family home, writing the following piece. The following is "At Night" in its entirety:

> Deeply lost in the night. Just as one sometimes lowers one's head to reflect, thus to be utterly lost in the night. All around people are asleep. It's just play acting, an innocent self-deception, that they sleep in houses, in safe beds, under a safe roof, stretched out or curled up on mattresses, in sheets, under blankets; in reality they have flocked together as they had once upon a time and again later in a deserted region, a camp in the open, a countless number of human beings, an army, a people, under a cold sky on cold earth, collapsed where once they had stood, forehead pressed on the arm, face to the ground, breathing quietly. And you are watching, are one of the watchmen, you find the next one by brandishing a burning stick from the brushwood pile beside you. Why are you watching? Someone must watch, it is said. Someone must be there.

At the onset of this writing, Kafka does not give a person or point of view; he does not specify who is lost, absorbed or submerged (Ger., *versunken*). This can be understood as a moment of self-shedding. He continues, using the German *man* ('one'), "Just as one sometimes lowers one's head to reflect, thus to be utterly lost in the night". It is possible to feel the absence of a protagonist here and a partial abdication of narratorship, which perhaps resonates with his use of 'he' in place of 'I' at times in his diaries and aphorisms. In *Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari (1986) trace this gesture of the bent head through Kafka's oeuvre and interpret it as "blocked, oppressed or oppressing, neutralised desire, with a minimum of connection" (p. 5). I trace this gesture of the lowered head to one thing: the act of writing. It is the last gesture of the Kafka who must be shed, or lost, to enter the aporetic beginning of this writing. This act of turning one's back on the world and lowering one's head to write is decreative: it is a partial disengagement from the self and world in which one was performing the act of *not writing* and called oneself by the name Kafka or by another name. It can be read as a gesture of self-shedding.

The world behind Kafka, as he sits at the desk with his head lowered, haunts the story at first: "It is just play-acting", he writes – "an innocent self-deception, that they sleep in houses, in safe beds, under a safe roof, stretched out or curled up on mattresses, in sheets, under blankets" (2011, p. 463). Then the shift occurs. That world, or one's illusion of it, is in the process of departing. The world of *not writing* is passing away. Another condition arises in the space created by withdrawal from that realm of ordinary activity. It is a world, admittedly, "intense and barren" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 9) but one which is expressive only of a decreated person, a person who is no longer only persisting in his family home in a literal night, but entering into the realm of a supra-personal vision: "in reality", he writes, "they have flocked together as they had once upon a time and again later in a deserted region, a camp in the open" (2011, p. 463). We are not entering the subjectivity of Kafka, or reading an expression of it, but moving with him towards a timeless vision, less like modernist fiction and more like Isaiah 21:6: "For thus my Lord said to me: Go, set up a sentry; let him announce what he sees" (Tanakh, 1917). The writing announces that it concerns "a countless number of [human beings], an army, a people, under a cold sky on cold earth, collapsed where once they had stood" – and that collapse becomes suddenly singular and intimate – "forehead pressed on the arm, face to the ground, breathing quietly" (Kafka, 2011, p. 463). This is perhaps the gesture of that post-decreative writer who, exhausted from the effort of this type of work, lowers his head to the desk.

To consider this writing through Weil's notion of decreativity, as a reduction of self, it is possible to sense a new intimacy that goes beyond the personal. The text can offer a literal instruction in its decreative method through a shifting, dissolving and resolving narratorial point of view. The work adopts the impersonal (or uniting) 'one' (Ger., *man*) to focus more intimately upon a single prone figure, who is found to be resting his head on his arm. Only at this point does the story take up a new point of view, as though that person had been raised up and able to speak: "And you are watching, are one of the watchers, you find the next one by brandishing a burning stick from the brushwood pile beside you. Why are you watching? Someone must watch, it is said. Someone must be there" (p. 463). This is the invitation to a

new non-subjective (or, at least, a less subjective) point of view – not a narrator but a decreated agency – neither Kafka nor I nor you. It is not only an invitation but an obligation. Essentially, as Weil has expressed it, one must be decreated to make room for one's neighbour (see Vetö 1994, pp. 22–23 and cf. Leviticus 19:18; Luke 10:25-37, ESV 2026). In this thought experiment with little context, we are flocking together, namelessly, at the encampment opened by Kafka's writing practice. We seem not to know who we are, and it is difficult to distinguish vestiges of ourselves from certain vestiges of Kafka; none have full personhood, but this does not mean that all is lost. Vetö (1994) observes that "The word 'person' has acquired in modern times a respectable connotation, but it is, at bottom, identical with the ego or the I, terms directly suggesting egotism, egocentrism, a certain violence and rapacity" (p. 18). We know that many of Kafka's characters were unnamed or figures of myth. It can be obligatory, compulsive and habit-forming to shed self; we are changed on returning. Hence, at another time, Kafka (1988a) writes, "I have no literary interests, but am made of literature" (p. 304).

Walter Benjamin, another of Kafka's contemporaries, observed Kafka's stories' literality and the importance in them of certain movements (*gestus*), noting:

> Experiments have proved that a [person] does not recognise [their] own walk on the screen or [their] own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what directs him to learning where he may encounter fragments of his own existence, fragments that are still within the context of the role. (Benjamin, 1970, p. 137)

This separation speaks to Kafka's apparent shedding of the familiar self and its world. The work is not produced through projection of what one already knows – and that includes the author himself. "At Night", a paragraph-long work, is a paradigm of the shedding of self that can be involved in the writing act – whether we conceive of this self as shed 'behind' or 'into' the work in question. I suggest that those "fragments of his own existence" that Benjamin mentions do not belong only to Kafka; they belong to anyone who recognises them in the context of their own role. The one who 'watches' is witness or decreated creator, a *not Kafka*, which is also a reader, in a sense. The gesture of the writing hands is to renounce action so as to bear witness in common at the first opportunity (even before the beginning, since we recall that the lowering of the head to write was in order "to reflect"). That reflective witness to approach and join a flock, to perform in common with others the action of decreation. It is not to annul oneself, or to disappear in the 'occasion' of writing as in Blanchot (1982), or to lose one's humanity, but to renounce isolation and positively join others in the particular way that literature (even while it isolates in a physical sense) makes possible. It draws all participants (including Kafka) away from Kafka and towards this goal of departure from the conditions that must change. Our own departure from them may be the only change we can effect.

The literality of "At Night" is only a starting point. It is true that the participant in "At Night" who may be 'in the dark' as regards this writing's content, can retreat to a distanced position of watching, to see all those immobilised worlds of subjectivity lying prone in the "deserted region" of the page by the light of a personal house. We can be positioned as individual readers

observing something that happened long ago and in which we are uninvolved. Yet the event purports to be happening "once upon a time", at the time of its production, but also "again in the future" – at any other time (Kafka, 2011, p. 463). Weil writes "We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves" (1977, p. 351). By renouncing a more personal expression, the writer has invited others who also need to renounce personal expression. Its flame is perpetually alight. The figure wields not a pen but a brushwood torch – flame is the enemy of books but a symbol of clarity, desire and human warmth. The watcher becomes an intermediary, motivated by desire, seeking something connective through and beyond the writing, which can never be fully claimed as one's own. Simone Weil (1956) writes: "Metaxu [the intermediary]. Every representation which draws us toward the non-representable. Need for metaxu in order to prevent us from seizing hold of nothingness instead of full being" (p. 233). Similarly, Kafka writes in his second Zürau aphorism: "All human error is impatience, a premature renunciation of method, an illusive [*scheinbares*] pinning down of an illusion [*scheinbaren*]" (translation mine; Kafka, 2006, p. 2) [4]. In the oscillating retreat from self by self (*Selbstabschüttelung*) which also happens to produce writings, one leaves behind a safe, pseudo-completeness for a precarious and nameless existence in a new place, "a camp in the open". The writing directs Kafka, and those who join him, to find and *found* a creative agency that can never be the province of a single author, reader, narrator or character. This presence is not in the text but in the act of our own surrender to it and to each other. It shifts a person from an isolated state into a feeling of connection with what we inadequately call Kafka, or Kafka's writing.

This is a new type of writing, even now. I do not become, or attempt to become, "deeply lost in the night" by identifying with an author, narrator or a character. And there is no room to completely lose myself as a reader. The writing will not allow it. If I lose my self, how will I renounce it? If one 'identifies', it can only be with the same *not-me* that Kafka identifies as *not-him*. In encountering this decreativity, I negate the non-encounters of my daily life, in which other people exist only in relation to me. Yet in some ways we do find Kafka. The zone produced by dedication to an act of writing also preserves traces of whichever self it undoes. This gives it a powerful charisma – not Kafka's charisma but an instructive negative charge in the space from which he has already withdrawn. This is not a theoretical Deleuzian 'assemblage' that can perform machinic operations or appropriate a non-human experience; it is, unpopularly, real human hope and love – a lived experience by living people, readers and writers, who creatively enter literature to achieve specific ends for themselves and for each other. It is also the thrill of the personal risk taken by giving decades to a far-fetched and innovative creative practice – writing – in the hope of such an intense and traditional thing as redemption.

There is no doubt that the enterprise risks self-destruction. It is precisely because Kafka is a willing participant in the difficulty of his writing and his writing practice that he is considered afflicted [5]. Kafka himself worried about the harmful effects of writing on his state of being and his life. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka mentions that he is incapable of traveling because it would take him too far from his writing desk, and muses that his writing practice is service to the devil; specifically, that it offered the exalted experience of writing in exchange for being

bound to a practice that made everything else unbearable (Kafka, 1977, p. 333; see also his *Letters to Felice*, 1988a, p. 304). Decreativity is always close to destructiveness, but it can and must be distinguished from it. Weil (1977) offers the following distinction: "Decreation: to make something pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for decreation" (p. 350). Regardless of Kafka's affiliations or affinities with religious philosophies, it is for explicable reasons that he feared the evil effects upon himself of his writing practice and also applied positive religious terms to it (and not to its products): for him, it was not only redemptive; it was a form of penance and prayer (Kafka, 2007, p. 212; Kafka, 1954, p. 312). Writing has an obvious close link to the 'uncreated' in the sense that it never fully brings anything into being; like the imagination, it has some immortal qualities. Its brushwood torch never goes out or even scorches its page.

A collective against exceptionalism

It is possible to perceive in the work a fractured and struggling self; there are frequent opportunities for enquiry foreclosures via prefabricated tropes, such as the 'tortured genius' or other notions of exceptionalism. In popular culture and in scholarly writings, Kafka is perceived as someone whose writing portrayed a bleak, threatening and nightmarish world, inhabited by characters who are isolated and perplexed. Seemingly informed by the unfinished novels and *Metamorphosis*, this is a Kafka of a habit so strong that attempts to counter it seem only to reinforce it [6]. A page of almost any work on Kafka evinces a nexus of pathologising adjectives. The first paragraphs of Stanley Corngold's (2009) "Kafka and the Ministry of Writing" (the introduction to his *Kafka: the Office Writings*), for example, offers "tormented", "possessed", "haunted", "craved", "pact", "monstrous" (p. 2) – and this is standard practice. That the writing project was a struggle is incontestable. Yet we know that Kafka considered himself built for that exact struggle, suited better to it than anything else (Kafka, 1988a, p. 304).

If decreation is a common need and self-shedding a valid writerly habit, my impression that Kafka's struggles are personal or pathological measures the extent to which I refuse to participate in those struggles myself. Finding a way out of our stagnation is a collective problem. Kafka's well-known metaphor is of the frozen sea inside "us" (*in uns*) – not merely inside *him* – to which literature must bring the axe (Kafka, 1977, p. 16); the use of the plural first person is not at all arbitrary. Kafka (1977) speaks of his writing in the hope of it being "useful to me and to the state" (p. 10). Renunciation was always for the good of the soul as well as for the sake of others; it was never a purely personal project. If I deviously read the struggles and fracturings of the work as idiosyncratic or exceptional, as expressions of his personal difficulties or genius, I am not setting out with Kafka but remaining in my own house, in myself and in my unchanged world. This would be to leave decreative activity to others, so that they will make more room for me. From that strong position, I can call them out as exceptional and avoid culpability for not joining in. Yet I find that I cannot blame the work on Kafka; nor can he take all the credit.

In his exposition of Weil's metaphysics, Vetö (1994) expresses Weil's surprising statement that "in general, all forms of artistic creation are acts of self-renunciation; the person of the

artist effaces itself completely before reality" (p. 102). Weil was not (wilfully and primarily) an artist or creative writer; the statement does seem idealistic [7]. More often, the obstacle of oneself is chipped away at gradually, and meanwhile – or rather, intermittently, in between writing attempts – a writer must exist in the world with a somewhat eroded or distracted self and an only partially glimpsed reality. Writing that raises us towards zero from our sub-zero position (to coopt Weil's phrase) may feel uplifting; however, it does not offer us self-improvement; it often makes our badness plainer to ourselves and others. Decreative writing practices are not exalted; they are just a way to sit together in the dust. Writing takes attention away from our loved ones, who may also be our neighbours and part of our collective or flock. In entering this intermediate world of desiring decreation – not possessing it or achieving it – one risks destruction and intense difficulty. The writer is not "completely" effaced but split – between engagement in the world and engagement in the writing process.

Between Two Antagonists

In one of his famous brief writings, Kafka describes two antagonists (*Gegner*: antagonists, opponents, adversaries). This is one of the many works in which Kafka uses the third person, 'he', in a way that can be read as a decreated, diminished 'I'. Originally from the diaries but collected by Kafka for the Zürau aphorisms at the end of his life (see Kafka, 2006), it reads in its entirety:

> He has two antagonists; the first presses him from behind, from his origins, the second bars his road ahead. He struggles with both. Actually the first supports him in his struggle with the second, for this one acts to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his struggle with the first, for of course that one is driving him back. But that is only the case in theory; for it is not only the two antagonists that are present, but himself as well, and what his own intentions are who can really say?

If, in another thought experiment, I eschew the idea that this struggle is an expression of a private, idiosyncratic pathology (Kafka's or my own), then there is no escape for me and, indeed, no room for me. I must participate as this third person, while I am almost immobilised between two monolithic entities. I resist thinking of them as the author behind my shoulder and the text in front of me, or the past and the future, or good and evil. I do not know what I am doing in this work, but I recall from the previous reading that "someone must watch, someone must be there". In that impassive standstill of the page, the desire for a way out arises. The pressure creates a crack in the ice. The story advances and regresses only to the extent of struggle, while my desire to engage with it only brings me up against its confines. Trapped in and by this writing, there is nowhere for my own wishes. I am not unreservedly invited to immersion in a narrative; nor am I completely rebuffed because I am also he. It is as though I am urged, from behind me, *Go ahead and find a new reality in this writing, if you do not like the one you have turned your back on!* And from in front of me, *If this writing does not suit you, go back to where you came from!* I do not have a means of advancement or retreat, or I possess them both in the manner that a bell possesses a tongue: only the sound escapes; that is, my own experience of struggle (or my reaction to it in frustration, humour or pity), which becomes evident as the only plausible outcome: "For it is not only the two antagonists who are

there", the story continues, "but himself as well, and who really knows his intentions?" This writing can be read as a representation of a lived decreative writing experience, in which the character is moved by his own desires towards his intermediary role. The intermediacy he is seeking is the to become as an active participant in his world; yet the world, by its very structure, blocks him from action. If this is Kafka's personal difficulty, the story is complete at that point: "what his own intentions are, who can really say?" The story becomes more legible if I resist the desire to pin the story on Kafka, admitting that fragments of myself are seen in it. My reading or writing practice is challenged: my desire to engage with another being for my entertainment or edification, while escaping responsibility for their conditions is a call from decreativity, announcing my own present condition (of self and 'my' world) as untenable. Weil posits the "impersonal decreative person", whose role is to act in service of others, and who no longer dwells at the centre of an imaginary world. About this condition, Vetö writes, "it implies the acknowledgment, in the universe, of relationships that are independent of us—the acknowledgment, that is, of reality as such" (p. 22).

In "Beyond Aporia?" (Kofman, 1988), discussing the nature of love as the intermediary between humanity and the divine, French Hellenic philosopher Sarah Kofman writes that "Love [Eros] gives neither wealth nor wisdom. He neither keeps nor owns anything. He offers only the possibility of incessant and imperishable generation" (p. 27). On the arising of desire, she writes that "Acting as a midwife to souls does not mean delivering them of a wisdom . . . which they possess without knowing it. It means creating within them an aporetic vacuum, a vacuum of plenitude which gives them infinite desire" (p. 27). In this labouring vacuum, between the adversaries, 'his' existence is negligible but essential. The struggle is the original condition, unavoidable, unsatisfactory and excessive; however, 'he' is also an intermediary figure, no longer merely existing in relation to irreconcilable forces, but also mediating between human beings (Kafka and myself, for example) and between the human and the divine possibilities of an existence that is merely a sign of predetermined forces and a more voluntary existence. Hence, Kafka continues, in some versions of "Two Antagonists":

> His dream, though, is that some day in an unguarded moment . . . he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.

The diminished figure has no name or qualities but exists as a means of wonder and connection. It is a figure that we can read not as a protagonist or a proxy for Kafka but one that arises out of (or even personifies) the decreative desire in writing.

At the end of his life, Kafka did not spend his time in Zürau finishing his novels. He worked on his so-called aphorisms – of which "He has two antagonists . . ." is one – cutting paper to shape and displaying each one in the middle of a blank page (see Kafka, 2006). He writes: "You are the exercise, the task. No student far and wide." And "From the true opponent a limitless courage flows into you" (p. 23). Each brief and condensed statement both advances towards a writing act and retreats from it; it invites and rebuffs. The brief form is barely born from its writer and, in this sense, it is not a production as much as a means of connection. As a

decreative act, it lives ‘uncreated’ as a renewable deed. In Weil’s oeuvre too, writing occurs in fragments that preserve cracks where the axe has hit the ice. There is progress through reduction. The two great antagonists of Weil’s metaphysics are Necessity and Love. She speaks for a vast portion of artistic, religious and philosophical thought when she asserts that creation is sacrifice, not a means of growth (Vetö, 1994, p. 12). Power cannot spill over into creation, creation itself being powerless; only love can enter into it (p. 9). This love is the motive and true ‘end’ for decreativity: neither the work nor the artist make sense in isolation.

A cage went in search of a bird

Kafka’s Zürau aphorism, “A cage went in search of a bird” (Kafka, 2006, p. 16), uses more concrete and asymmetrical opposing terms than “Two Antagonists”. The situation is even more intense and seems impossible. The aphorism speaks to the desire behind creativity and practises a tolerance for abstaining from seizing meaning prematurely. The cage that seeks is an intermediary figure, already a non-cage moved by desire. It is a split being; it proceeds by ‘negative movement’, as it must (it cannot proceed as a cage; a cage is passive); it must get out of itself. In doing so, it becomes a decreative embodiment of Necessity, which demands the search, and Love, which resists capture and possession. Hence Kafka (1977) wrote: “God does not want me to write, but I – I must.” (p. 10) As a human being, it is enough to live and not to write; but as a writer, writing is inescapable. This oscillating “I – I” of Kafka’s is what we come to understand not only as self-shedding but also a doubling-by-halving, a creative reduction; it arises through repeated attempts at intimacy with the writing act itself.

A cage is both the most likely thing to seek a bird and also the least likely thing to succeed. Things seem set up for a battle of good and evil: two antagonists, a replay of familiar tropes. However, the battle does not occur. In the image of cage and bird, we can see the separation of container and contained noted earlier, in Weil’s and Kafka’s awareness of carrying a burden not entirely their own, and Kafka’s hauling himself on his back while venturing into his writing.

In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, we find Socrates suggesting an empty aviary as a metaphor for the mind:

> [L]et’s equip each mind with an aviary for all sorts of birds . . . We need to make the following points: that the space is empty in infants; that the birds are to be thought of as pieces of knowledge; that to acquire a bird and confine it in the enclosure is to have learned or discovered the matter with which the piece of knowledge is concerned; and that this is what knowing is. (197d–e)

One of the puzzles in this part of the dialogue is how to distinguish between tracking down a certain bird for the first time and locating it subsequently in the busy, thriving aviary (198a). Socrates observes that with regard to his cage/bird metaphor, we might call transmission ‘teaching’, reception ‘learning’ and having ‘knowing’. He then questions why it seems that sometimes one goes in search of a piece of knowledge one already possesses, leading towards a distinction between having and possessing. He wonders, for instance, “what we should call it when a mathematician sets out to count or a literate person to read” (198e). Humorously, they abandon the dialogue, finding no sense in it, while the obvious answer, which they have

all along ‘desired’ to find, is the desire itself. It is desire that moves us to knowledge and we can never be in permanent possession of it. Sarah Kofman (1988) describes the human soul itself as *eros*, that which “neither knows nor does not know, but which desires knowledge, which is, by its very nature, a philosopher” (p. 27). Kafka’s cage and bird can be read as a philosophy of decreative desire. While the aphorism seems quite innocent, or something like an absurd trap in itself, the closer we come to it the more strongly it repels, forcing the participant to generate more desire. It is a curiosity- and desire-producing object that draws you from yourself.

At first, oscillating movement occurs: there is a strong temptation to reverse the terms ‘cage’ and ‘bird’ to establish stronger rationality, since a cage cannot move or search but a bird excels at these things. To reverse the terms is a movement to kill the aphorism quickly, as if it were an annoyance, a small pest [8]. This false start at movement cannot succeed; birds do not seek cages. The terms must stand; the cages of terms may not move. The first escape into what I tell myself is rationality is in fact premature mysticism. The terms must be allowed to stand until their rationality is exhausted. Having some familiarity with Kafka’s writing, I am willing to accept that Kafka’s cages may move in a way I do not yet understand; in other words, I am tempted to accept the statement as a form of literature; perhaps this is not ideal but at least it means accepting it on its own terms and in its own world, rather than dragging it into the immobilising cage of my world. I can read it as literature, but I should not demand that it remain literature as a means of uninvolving myself.

Flight into metaphor at this point is also premature mysticism, but it is difficult to resist interpretations through domestic violence, gulags, institutions of control – but do they have agency? Do institutions have agency? Can they move? They cannot. Besides, it would have been easy enough to write *the predator goes in search of prey*. This is not what is stated. What is stated poses the question, “If the cage cannot move, who moves the cage?” It is tempting to posit a solution via a third term like that ‘umpire’ of “Two antagonists”: it is not cages that seek birds but the operators of cages, though they remain hidden behind their institutions and systems. This invites infinite regress: who moves those movers? Who is moving me, while I search for the truth of this aphorism? It is an easier question to ask than answer. When I move back and forth seeking meaning this way, I seem to flutter or mediate between cage and bird as if I am trying to unite them. I consider the stultifying adjective ‘Kafkaesque’ but it gets me nowhere. There is longing and frustration to the extent of the emptiness of a cage with an open door, inviting a change it is ill-equipped to produce but determined to allow. The only way a cage can actively go in search of a bird is by renouncing itself and its stability. I have to give up on the part of my original nature that knows enough already and wants for nothing. “A cage went in search of a bird” means that the cage was moved to climb up into a tree and search from branch to branch. If birdlessness is truly impossible to live with, then the cage will shed itself and go where birds go, eat what birds eat. It will even be worth it to become an absurdity if there is a strong enough desire for changed conditions. It will become a non-bird in search of itself, sitting in the branches, swaying its door back and forth.

Kafka uses the past tense, “a cage went in search of a bird”, so it is acceptable to wonder if this is a cosmogony. Were birds originally cages and this is how they came into being, how they learnt about movement, freedom and flight? The form of allegory is here a form of aporia; this leads us to renounce all but the writing on its own terms. A cage that cannot move cannot go in search of anything, yet it can do these things in the form that it takes in writing. The symbolic nature of a cage, or of writing, is immobile and made for immobilising, but Kafka has decreated it by immobilising himself, literally, at the writing desk. The aphorism is a frozen sea in search of an axe; it is ourselves seeking movement in writing from our conditions. Prior to writing, we have seized hold of full being prematurely. In this state, other beings are “existing only in relation to me, they have become as it were unreal, they serve only to preserve that precarious balance we call personality” (Weil in Vetö, 1994, p. 20). The struggle of decreative writing is not to produce a fragment of text but an organising principle completely alternative to the social one; it finds it in a shared need for and response to that principle. It is organised around love as *metaxu* (the intermediary), which moves naturally into the space from which one withdraws one’s own demands and projections.

Conclusion

Something cosmogenic springs from the root of the writing act, which draws us away from spurious autonomy in a sterile environment. Decreativity can make the difficulty inherent in a writing practice more legible by drawing out the philosophical and spiritual context of renunciation. Kafka’s personal redemption, sought through a seemingly idiosyncratic writing practice, looks different in the light of self-shedding as a means of connection. Weil (2002) referenced this communal desire when she wrote that “it is the essence of things to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to another, and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading also to God” (pp. 145–46). This practice is ongoing, sane and hospitable. It is never a question of a pathological ‘lack of fulfilment’, a ‘damaged personality’ or ‘fragmentation’, but of leaving new entry points for the axe.

Notes

[1] The writer Charles Péguy coined the term decreation. Péguy used it inversely to Weil, to mean a bad or destructive erosion of self through contact with unoriginal or predigested ideas. For background on this connection and the term’s use by Simone Weil see Vetö’s *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, pp. 11–40.

[2] Throughout the vast and diverse scholarship on Kafka and Weil, these presentations are pervasive and influential. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the connection between decreativity and ‘damaged personalities’. These character interpretations of two major thinkers are mentioned here as common stumbling blocks to a fresh reading of their work.

[3] Whether this “other will” is perceived as spiritual or psychological, to speak of breaking the will is to speak of both decreation and possible destruction. According to Weil's ‘sub- zero’ model, decreation raises us towards grace – the obvious connection relevant here is the Gethsemane prayer of Jesus in “Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done” – while destruction in service of an infernal will would plunge us further into negative integers.

[4] Ironically, translation involves exactly this kind of pinning down; *scheinbaren*: seeming, apparent, ostensible, illusory, feigned.

[5] For a seminal psychoanalytic critique, see *Kafka's Prayer* (1947) by Paul Goodman.

[6] See, for example, David Foster Wallace's "Laughing with Kafka" (2011) and Stanley Corngold's *The Office Writing*s (2009). These works about Kafka's sense of humour and his production of sober legal writings respectively are presumed to be of interest partly because they are anomalous with the more pervasive reputation of the author as intense, negative or pathological.

[7] On Simone Weil's underacknowledged prose and the possibility of her oeuvre's kinship not only with philosophical and religious ideas but also with the French literary tradition, see Joan Dargan's *Simone Weil: Thinking Poetically* (1999).

[8] To take the terms literally without reflection is also dangerous. A recent book, *A Cage Went in Search of a Bird: Ten Kafkaesque Stories* (2024), invited renowned authors' contributions of stories in commemoration of Kafka's centennial anniversary (*A Cage Went in Search of a Bird*, 2024). Whatever the merits of the stories in themselves, this anthology's approach recycles a prefabricated perception, reinforcing tropes – nightmare, absurd, strange – and positions us as trapped in an incomprehensible world with a comprehensible Kafka. For a quintessential non-reading of this aphorism, in which the cage, after much stalking of its object of desire, finds itself a hapless bird to trap, see also Cary Fagan's illustrated *A Cage Went in Search of a Bird* (2017), which, as one reviewer put it, reads "like an endorsement of giving up on your dreams/hopping into an abusive relationship" (Jacki, 2017). According to my own reading of the aphorism, the consequences for Fagan's cage are even worse: it has assertively reinforced itself through another's destruction, the reverse of the decreative process.

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