

## Fear of Men

What is ultimately always at stake is *legitimacy*—a notion which unfortunately has nothing to do with mathematical correctness. For in this modern age our legitimacy-schemata are all statistical, rational: what matters is not truth but on which side the arguments, the reasons fall, and a reason is in each case a reason *rendered*—tendered and taken up.<sup>1</sup> That is: my proofs amount to nothing if you simply choose not to consider them—not to listen.

Derrida says: "This law reinscribes the unforgivable, and error itself, at the heart of the forgiveness asked for or given."<sup>2</sup> To ask forgiveness—pardon, rather—is to ask to be legitimized, an act which is revealed here to itself constitute a delegitimization: *the asking betrays one's illegitimacy*, and at that one's unfitness for legitimization. To ask to be legitimized is to speak proofs of one's legitimacy into the air, knowing that no one has anything to gain by condescending to listen; for acceptance of such a proof would in each case force the listener to renounce their own legitimacy: in any language of proof, what is heavily evidenced remains just as unproved, as illegitimate, as what is heavily evidenced against, what is disreputable; a language of proof levels the topography which the language of rationality has instituted. To accept the Kafka of the "Letter to His Father" as justified in asserting his own blamelessness vis-à-vis the father is to accept the methodology which Kafka uses to derive this blamelessness: a methodology which *will* ultimately place the blame on his father, no matter Kafka's own feelings on the topic. (Kafka does acknowledge this fact.<sup>3</sup>) He who writes a letter in an attempt to beg back his legitimacy—whether this be Kafka or e.g. Spinell from Mann's "Tristan"<sup>4</sup>—then cuts a rather laughable figure, reveals himself as childish, resentful, petulant—only makes the case that he does not deserve legitimization in the first place.

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1 See Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason* (Indiana University Press, 1991), 118ff.

2 Jacques Derrida, "Literature in Secret: An Impossible Filiation," trans. Adam Kotsko, 5.

3 See Franz Kafka, "Dearest Father," trans. Hannah and Richard Stokes (Oneworld Classics, 2008), 84.

4 See Thomas Mann, "Tristan," from *Tonio Kröger and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke (Bantam, 1970), 134ff.

And yet one cannot have legitimacy without being legitimized, any more than one can truly be of the aristocracy simply by declaring oneself noble, by buying oneself a title.

There is a more profound sense in which the asking for and giving out of legitimization are markers of undeservingness of legitimacy: both involve speaking, opening one's mouth—communication—which is an unchastity.<sup>5</sup> It is the same unchastity as has poisoned monogamy, made it impossible for Kafka to accede to: sex, which is what is at the heart of marriage, is *filth*, is fundamentally an impurity and animality whose existence is papered over only to be revealed blandly and in all its incongruence at the subject's coming-of-age.<sup>6</sup> It is the same unchastity as reveals itself in each instance of the *secret shared once*: in interpellating Abraham into the relation called a *secret*, God establishes a dyad,<sup>7</sup> a parcel of monogamy; as Derrida notes, it is precisely faithfulness to this dyad that precipitates the something unforgivable which poisons Abraham<sup>8</sup>—something illegitimate, strictly speaking, but what is illegitimate is always illegitimate for a good reason, by definition. What is an outrage is not Kafka's illegitimacy—we are all already lost—but the legitimacy his father has somehow monkeyed his way into possession of.

Then the Derridean *pardon for not meaning* shows itself as indicating some sentiments far darker than Derrida is at any point willing to admit: in one direction, *legitimize my keeping a secret*,<sup>9</sup> legitimize my hypocrisy, the hypocrisy that seeps out from the impossible notion of a *chaste marriage*; in another direction, *legitimize my irresponsibility as a writer*, free me from those demands which are made on my labor by intellectual and spiritual honesty, moral uprightness, let me be free to write what means nothing, what is only

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5 This is a direct consequence of the identification of use-of-language-to-communicate with exogamy, and misuse of language with incest, made in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard von Sturmer, ed. Rodney Needham (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969), 494-497.

6 See Kafka, "Dearest Father," 72-74. *Filth* is Kafka's word; the rest are mine.

7 And we know that the dyad is always impermissibly Gnostic.

8 "As if Abraham, speaking in his inmost heart, said to God: forgive me for having preferred the secret that ties me to you rather than the secret that ties me to the other other, to each and every other—because a secret love ties me to the one as to the other, as to my very own." Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 5.

9 See Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 8.

nexus for some pleasure or another.<sup>10</sup> It is an aesthetic direction which may well be polemicized at length against, but more relevantly there is a deep hypocrisy embedded within it: *there is no literature which succeeds at meaning nothing*, there is no literature which succeeds at totally shedding itself of any morality-system. For in angling at meaning nothing one is still angling in some direction, researching within a certain ideological program.

More precisely: what constitutes, interpellates each man as a man—one could call it the *phallic signifier*—is the replication in him of the command given by the Father:<sup>11</sup> *deflower!* That is, in being filiated, in involving oneself into a filiation, or actively endeavoring to do so—and I read the word *filiation* as denoting the production specifically of a *son*—one is subjecting oneself to this command: enacting it, violating-for-hire. Thus, legitimization being legitimization into some filiative structure, as lawful son or lawful wife, the *pardon for not meaning* boils down to the request to be like the Father who has hurt one,<sup>12</sup> despite one's having left the fold, despite one's putative "parasitism."<sup>13</sup> Yet this being-like-the-Father consists of a registration into a certain order within spoken language—the discourse of deflowering—and, spoken language being precisely that language which is a describing *around* an objective<sup>14</sup> entity, a bricolaging up a sufficient approximation of it from a suite of stock phrases, there is no being-like-the-Father without "the responsibility... of meaning and of referent."<sup>15</sup> (Is it a responsibility? I think it rather a liberty taken: in writing the really there,

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10 In this connection see e.g. Pierre Guyotat's novel *Eden, Eden, Eden*; I suppose de Sade would be less obscure and similar.

11 Which one may identify with Freud's "father in the original horde" and Lacan's *fonction du père* or *nom du père*. See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (Hogarth Press, 1939), 130-133; Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 79-80; Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," trans. Cormac Gallagher, *The Letter* 41 (2009): 56, 58.

12 "...the weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defence, but by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor." Sándor Ferenczi, "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child—The Language of Tenderness and of Passion," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 24, no. 2 (1988): 203.

13 Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 12.

14 I use the word especially following Bergson: "...we apply the term *subjective* to what seems to be completely and adequately known, and the term *objective* to what is known in such a way that a constantly increasing number of new impressions could be substituted for the idea which we actually have of it." Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1910), 83-4.

15 Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 24.

one is freed from any responsibility for the moral content of one's work simply by taking as axiom *whatever is, is right*.)

It ought to be made clear that *deflower* is not meant purely or even primarily in a sexual sense. For example: at the beginning of one of his seminars, Lacan, having chalked a matheme, quickly adds: "After what I just put on the board, you may think you know everything. Don't."<sup>16</sup> The deflowering, in this situation, is precisely the tagging of even the one who has studied the matheme to completion—who has *done the reading*, so to speak; who has attempted to take hold of the information of which the matheme promises lossless transmission—as misguided, naïve, even delusional<sup>17</sup> in their interpretation. The threat of being deflowered, that is, is the threat that *what one has* might be taken away from one (literal virginity being that possession which is most clearly seen as always having been entirely one's own, and one's own responsibility to defend against those who would have at it<sup>18</sup>): in this case, the *what one has* is the system of *geistig* representation of oneself<sup>19</sup> that one has built, which, one realizes, can easily be rendered invalid, named irrational or risible, by a stray comment or the stroke of a pen—in precisely the same way that Kafka's system is rendered risible by a simple paternal ignoring.

So *filiation* is accounted for; what of *literature*? Perhaps it is most useful to speak of two different literatures: a Western canon and a *geheim*-canon.<sup>20</sup> (The former incorporates those texts which are *treated* as literature,<sup>21</sup> the latter those texts—and I claim without proof

16 Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 78.

17 "...the delusions of paranoiacs have an unpalatable external similarity and internal kinship to the systems of our philosophers. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1955), 17:271.

18 As evidenced by the undeniably substantial cultural penetration of the formula of the virgin-martyr hagiography: girl adopts Christianity, rejects a suitor to preserve her purity; the suitor takes violent, state-sponsored revenge; the girl miraculously keeps her virginity throughout her ordeal, and comes to her death piously and chastely.

19 "I have worried, for as long as I can recall, so deeply about asserting my spiritual [*geistigen*] existence that nothing else has ever mattered to me." Kafka, "Dearest Father," 64.

20 After Stefan George's *heimliches Deutschland*, a notion constructed in much the same spirit and perhaps not to such a different end.

21 "...no sentence is literary in itself nor does it unveil its 'literarity' in the course of an *internal* analysis; it becomes literary, it acquires its literary *function* only according to context and convention, that is to say from non-literary powers..." Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 24.

that such texts exist<sup>22</sup>—which *are* literature whether or not they are treated as such: certain Greek texts, for example, which Derrida would maintain are not *literature* in the institutional sense,<sup>23</sup> are eligible for inclusion in the latter category regardless.) The canon, Derrida claims, proceeds via a filiation which is "impossible possibility";<sup>24</sup> but what is impossible about this filiation is precisely what is impossible in the *chaste marriage*; that is, the participation of literature in the filiation-regime at large is no more nor less impossible than the participation of social organization in the filiation-regime at large. What is requisite, then, for the emergence of a truly pure literature, a literature-in-itself, is a parallel current—the *geheim*-canon—of texts which are situated at such a remove from filiative and subjectivating structures for their participation in filiation to be truly unthinkable, a pipe-dream; texts which one might say are deeply *afraid of men* and of the deflowering which men promise, which would not dare come close enough to a man for the attainment of legitimacy on their part to be anything beyond a motif within a fantasy entirely segregated from action. Into which canon Kafka's work falls I am at this point not entirely sure.

### **Comments:**

This was a fascinating, theoretical essay piece on legitimacy in Derrida (and Kafka). In your introduction, you set up an intriguing premise, turn to Derrida and the Kafka to further contextualise this premise, you offer a layered reading of Kafka through Derrida, and you also offer many citations to back up where your reading is drawing from. To take this even further, I would offer more signposting to show where your main thesis is. I think it would also be worth showing how you might be adding to/progressing/perhaps even disagreeing with, say, Derrida's argument to show where you stand in relation to existing argumentation. Likewise, I think some of the footnoted material could be brought into the body (or at least the name of the thinker/critic/theorist/writer you are referencing) to allow you to show off where you are building upon others' ideas – this can help you to realise the intervention, significance and, therefore, originality of your analysis. Turning to the essay body, you still progress an interesting theoretical analysis inspired by the different strands of influences, in places you offer topic sentences that move on and clarify your argumentative moves, you do some nice digging into specific notions (i.e. the paragraph unpacking the concept of deflowering), and you land on a point tying this to literature. I also thought it was interesting to point to moments where you

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22 And that one of these texts is Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina*.

23 Jacques Derrida, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1992), 40.

24 Derrida, "Literature in Secret," 24.

didn't have a particular answer/evidence. To take this even further, again I would perhaps explicate more in places to own where you are taking ideas from other sources in the body of the sentence (such as Derrida – avoid saying “as Derrida notes” unless you are summarising his arguments – show what and *why* you agree, if you agree – use metanarrative to own your scholarly agency more) and to show off where you are progressing upon it so that you can show off the originality of your particular position (as well as to own where you stand within a wider theoretical/literary conversation), I would use the introduction to help show where you end up landing (i.e. using Derrida to perhaps challenge an impetus/attempt in Kafka's writing, and how you're doing this to say something about literature). I also wonder if it is worth dwelling on your theoretical concepts and showing off more your understanding/definition of them (and even your application of them to different contexts than the original source) to show off even more your understanding and critical analysis. All in all, I appreciate that this is more within the genre of theory than a more stilted academic essay on literature, so do keep those original ideas, I just think some of the conventions of the conventional academic essay can help to bring out the significance of what you are doing here.