

Drifting Between Worlds and Breaking the Mental Frontiers.

Vişniec's rewriting of Kafka*

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IN A well-known essay, Michel Foucault considers that unlike the nineteenth century's great obsession with history, the contemporary period is one dominated by space: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."¹ In a similar vein Julian Murphet observes that "we postmoderns live 'more spatially' than the moderns, who somehow had it in them to live 'more temporally' than we."² This "spatial turn" proved to be extremely fertile for a series of research areas in which spatial representations and the imagery of the frontier became the new catalysts of the current intellectual debate. Whether geopolitical, linguistic or cultural, the investigation of crossing borders comes to be of great relevance in mapping not only historical realities but also a sense of identity subjected to continuous configurations. Topics such as globalization, migration or recent military events bring in the foreground the issue of a border suddenly permeable and translucent in which there is no clear distinction anymore between the spaces delimited by this frontier. Placed in contiguity, such spaces contaminate each other and, as in a photographic double exposure, create a third space that can no longer identify with either of them. This overlapping of boundaries requires an internalization of this process in which transcending the mental frontier represents the last redoubt that an individual has to overcome.

For a series of writers that lived this kind of experience a way of coping with these new realities was to be found in the textual practice of rewriting canonical works. For instance, Milan Kundera, confronted with the violent transgression of Czechoslovakia's borders by the Soviet army, found mental refuge in rewriting Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste* into a new work that became a document about the state of mind of a writer still shaken

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by this breach: "Faced with the eternity of the Russian night, I had experienced in Prague the violent end of Western culture such as it was conceived at the dawn of the modern age, based on the individual and his reason, on pluralism of thought and on tolerance. In a small Western country I experienced the end of the West . . . when this weight of rational irrationality fell on my country, I felt an instinctive need to breathe deeply of the spirit of the post-Renaissance West. And that spirit seemed nowhere more concentrated than in the feast of intelligence, humor and fantasy that is 'Jacques le Fataliste.'"³ If Kundera rewrote Diderot, others appealed to Kafka, discovering in this process of rewriting his works not only an authentic artistic practice but, most of all, a true space of freedom.

Since 1953, the intense process of destalinization has thrown the Socialist bloc into a truly Kafkaesque situation where the same leaders who once fabricated, on Stalin's orders, abject trials and condemned, with a chilling ease, thousands of people, were now nominated by Khrushchev to initiate and conduct an investigation in order to identify the ones responsible for the distortion and betrayal of the socialist principles. For a researcher such as Erika Gottlieb, one of the destalinization tests is represented by the attempt to rehabilitate the works of Kafka. If immediately after the war a weekly communist journal asked whether „should we burn Kafka?,” the symposium dedicated to Kafka, on May 1963, by which he was restored to the cultural map, takes the form of an allowed subversion, of a concession made by the Communist regime who was hoping thus to control the explosive force of this writer; a force derived, primarily, from the fact that Kafka's works functioned similarly to a Rorschach test,⁴ revealing the thoughts, predispositions and phobias of the reader, rather than of the writer's.

After the second World War, and subsequently, on the background represented by the Cold War, the reception of Kafka's work, like a litmus paper, managed to highlight two distinct ideological areas: "In the West, the word Kafkaesque became synonymous with the annihilation of liberal individualism by the impersonal, all-penetrating mazes of totalitarian power, and *The Trial* in particular became an 'illustration' of the horrors of totalitarian regimes. Communist critics, on the other hand, judged his fiction as pre-fascist documents showing the consequences that emerge from 'blind obedience and sacrifice of intellect.'"⁵ A similar observation made Jean-Paul Sartre who, in delivering his speech at the Peace Congress in Moscow, in July 1962, advocated for disarmament in the cultural sphere, identifying in the plurivalent reception of Kafka—distorted and misinterpreted in the West, while passed over in silence in the East—one of the primal sins of using culture as an ideological weapon.⁶

Long time ignored by the Communist authorities, or even banned in some countries of the Socialist camp, Kafka's works denoted, as Georges Bataille pointed out, the opposite meaning of the Communist ideology. An attempt to limit Kafka just to a depiction of the capitalist inferno, continues Bataille, cannot constitute itself as a feasible solution since Kafka discusses not only the bourgeois bureaucracy and justice, but the idea of any type of bureaucracy and justice.

Kafka's rehabilitation in 1963 represents more than just a recall of his work from Index. It becomes the initial point in building the myth of an *avant la lettre* dissident who succeeded to make, like in an act of a fulfilled prophecy, a radiography of a totalitarian system with whom Communism was to identify down to nuances and details. The

allusions and references to his work, more and more numerous in the seventh and eighth decade of the last century, form a parallel discourse and a means of resistance to the indoctrinating and manipulative pressure exerted by the totalitarian system. Thus, his works became true metaphors, loaded with a maximum of relevance concerning the absurd reality instituted by the Communist regime: “*The Castle* of the new Communist ruling class; *The Penal Colony* of torture in the police-state; and *The Trial* of the totalitarian legal system, where everyone is guilty until proven innocent.”⁷⁷

Becoming an important instrument for undermining the Communist authorities, the Kafka intertext coagulates around it the creative energies of the Eastern European writers, creating a space of a common memory in which it can be inscribed, with the same legitimacy, authors such as the Czechs Ivan Klima and Vaclav Havel, the German Peter Weiss or the Albanian Ismail Kadare.

Another relevant example can be found in the Romanian cultural space, where the novel of Matei Vişniec, *Mister K. Released*, illustrates the same aspects of a discussion regarding dictatorship, freedom and rewriting. If Milan Kundera resorted to rewriting in order to treat his anxiety aroused by the Soviet military mobilization in Czechoslovakia, Matei Vişniec rearticulates *The Trial* in an attempt to restore an inner balance that was disturbed, paradoxically, precisely by a sudden sense of freedom.

Sharply contrasting with the oppressive and abusive Romanian space, the Western world in which Vişniec entered in 1987 showed to the expatriate behind the Iron Curtain that freedom is something that is to be cultivated, learned and practiced and if unexercised for long periods of time it gets forgotten just like any other habit. A long prison experience has the strange power not only to atrophy the sense of freedom into an individual, but also to make an entire existence to become inconceivable outside detention.

Liberated, like from a Platonic cave, in which the sole reality of the chained individuals is the deceptive appearance of shadows projected on a wall, Matei Vişniec, arriving in Paris in 1987, felt a real shock: “the shock of freedom. As if I stepped out of a prison and I didn’t know what to do with my freedom. Suddenly, I felt like Kafka’s character, mister K., but living a trauma in reverse, in other words not the shock of being arrested, but the one of being released.”⁷⁸ Having a real therapeutic function, rewriting Kafka offered Vişniec a moment of respite after which the anxiety caused by the violent clash of these two different worldviews would fade away. The geographical distance towards Ceauşescu’s Romania will eventually transform itself into an inner detachment that Vişniec will reach by rewriting the epic core of Kafka’s *The Trial*.

Discovering a Paris where “everything was culture, from coffee shops to beggars, from monuments to street sweepers,” for Matei Vişniec the feeling of freedom, before it could be internalized, first it had to be contemplated and analyzed with the uncertainty and hesitation of a man who, like Segismundo, Calderón de la Barca’s character, can awaken at any moment, realizing that it was all just a dream. Exploring his freedom and decomposing it into smaller, more easily to process doses, Vişniec will find that “not the people are the ones who are free, but the countries . . . There are free countries and anyone who sets foot on their territory immediately feels free. And free people who are travelling to countries where freedom is not yet settled immediately feel anxiety and get scared. There are, on this planet, areas that don’t become truly free not even when they

declare themselves independent and start building democracy.” France was for Vişniec such a land of freedom, where simple walks on the streets of Paris seemed to the Romanian writer fabulous experiences of getting in contact with an unmediated vital force.

In this climate of infinite manifestation of social and artistic freedom, Matei Vişniec will initiate the project of a novel concerning the impossible freedom of a character that is unable to rediscover and especially to rethink himself in this new situation. Written quickly, in the first half of 1988, the novel *Mister K. released* remained in the drawer for a while, unfinished, because, as the author confesses, „I did not know how to end it.”¹⁰ The concluding moment was represented by the revolutionary events of 1989 that came to end not only a historical experience, but also Vişniec’s novel, „both fictional and physically.”¹¹

Although published twenty years after the moment of its conception, the novel *Mister K. released* does not leave the impression of a deferring but, on the contrary, it succeeds to be surprisingly topical. The generous amount of time that the author has given to his novel proves to be not only a test of patience to which Vişniec, like in an act of penance, voluntarily complies, but a necessary time for his own experience to impersonalize. In this way, Vişniec’s reflection on freedom becomes more than just an account on the oppressiveness of a totalitarian regime, holding its relevance also in the new context of the recently installed democracy.

If at first “writing this novel had a therapeutic function for me, so that publishing it would have been like exhibiting a medical treatment,” the changing realities of a world that seems to have lost any sense of direction determined Vişniec to consider that “the therapy that I have applied on myself, in my attempt to understand how to use this freedom, is worthy of becoming public. The entire European world needs, at this moment, a certain therapy in order to step out of the present neurosis and civilization impasse.”¹²

Describing his novel as a simple story, the narrative situation in which Vişniec places his character is not at all a simplistic one, revealing very soon its power to create anguish: “my character finds himself being released and this freedom seems as an abnormal expulsion from a world with which he is accustomed. Expelled from prison, my character becomes uncertain, begins to have thousands of doubts, wandering around the prison.”

With an exposition reduced to a single sentence, Matei Vişniec, like in a strange game with distorting mirrors, inverts Kafka’s famous beginning—“Someone must have been telling tales about Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested”¹³—into an articulation that acquires the same attributes of an absurd and inexplicable gesture: “on one morning Kosef J. got released.”¹⁴ But liberation does not mean, implicitly, freedom. Moreover, for a desolated being such as Kosef J. his release will represent a real punishment. Although the physical incarceration ends, Kosef J. will remain captive in other forms of imprisonment. Forced from now on to follow the complicated bureaucratic procedure in order to finalize his official releasing documents, Kosef J. will replace the captivity inside the prison with the one inside the incomprehensible mechanisms of the law. To this new form of imprisonment will be added another one, the inability to communicate, thus transforming him into the prisoner of a language that fails to communicate and, inherently, to relate with otherness. His inability to think of himself as a being not only released, but truly free represents ano-

ther closure that confines Kosef J. not only from the rest of the prisoners, but especially from himself. The triple incarceration that paradoxically follows this release transforms Kosef J. into an individual without community, canceling him any sense of belonging whether to prison, to his hometown or to his family. As a corollary, his liberation from prison becomes an equivalent of death because to exist means to be acknowledged in the outside—*ex sistere*. Condemned to freedom, the inmate will continue to revolve around the prison in an unlimited waiting hoping to find out, at some point, that his release was nothing but a mistake which can be fixed at any time.

Being an attentive reader of the Prague writer and having himself a long practice in creating Kafkaesque worlds, Višniec shows that any access in the logic of a repressive mechanism is equally valid to another, whether is represented by an arrest or, on the contrary, by a release. Only oppositional at a semantic level, the relationship between imprisonment and freedom is, on an ontological level, one of a strange equivalence. Multiplied to infinity, the totalitarian maze becomes grasping while exiting such a labyrinth always implies entering into another, thus describing a recursive structure in which Ariadne's thread is not saving anyone from the claws of the Minotaur; instead it keeps together a constellation of different but always the same penal colonies. In this overarching prison, escaping or even being released become futile acts in the absence of a reliable boundary to delineate the inside from the outside, in other words life in captivity from freedom.

The change of perspective that Višniec brings in rewriting Kafka's *The Trial* is an extremely significant one, indicating towards a world in which the law of the excluded middle is no longer viable, being repealed by a simultaneous actualization of irreconcilable situations. Both disjunctive and copulative, such a spectrum of possibilities quickly reveals its potential to cause cracks and ontological shocks, disorientation and confusion of realities. In such a universe any verb is conjugated both in the affirmative as well as in the negative mood, in a huge waste of energy where every action cancels itself, remaining therefore stuck in the same initial point. This duality creates a constant state of tension which, at a personal level, indicates towards a total paralysis, an immobility of action and an inhibition of any free will. Through depolarization, this world does not invest anyone with decision-making power because all the available valences are already filled in by the totalitarian system. Under these circumstances freedom can only be superfluous while the act of escaping seems like an expulsion of a foreign body, allowed by a totalitarian system which is, in this way, recalibrating itself in order to elude implosion by redirecting it towards the individual sphere.

The deconstruction of an identity sense, by forcing an individual to simultaneously undertake contradictory positions, triggers an existential vacuum in which the pressure accumulated by the totalitarian system neutralizes itself, ensuring in this way its safeguarding. The price of this action is supported by the human factor which is reduced to numbers and statistics in an equation in which it is not a constant, nor a variable, but a coefficient of a function whose law the individual fails to understand. Thrown into a world in which everything exists and, at the same time, does not exist, Višniec's character becomes an instrument to explore this void, transmitting live and collecting, like a black box, the details of a violent confrontation between two opposites that occupy the same place in time and space.

The universe created by Vişniec is not only dystopian but, in the terms of cosmology theories, it acquires the traits of antimatter, having thus the power to shake the foundations of a world that has long ceased to be the best of all possible worlds. □

Notes

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11. Vişniec, *Domnul K. eliberat*, 6.
12. Vişniec, "Despre imposibila libertate," 4.
13. Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Mike Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.
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Abstract

Drifting Between Worlds and Breaking the Mental Frontiers. Vişniec's rewriting of Kafka

In the last decades, limology, or border studies, successfully managed to raise a vast interest within the scientific community and argue, in a convincing manner, its own relevance. Becoming a well calibrated seismograph, this interdisciplinary field of research preserves the memory of an almost Brownian motion in which frontiers—geopolitical, linguistic or cultural ones—get blurred and overlap. But crossing a border means more than just a passing beyond, it also requires an internalization of this process in which transcending the mental frontier represents the last redoubt that an individual has to overcome. On the strength of such a frontier can testify Matei Vişniec, a writer who although left Romania in 1987, will succeed only later to transform the geographical distance that separated him from the Iron Curtain into an inner detachment. By rewriting Kafka, who himself is positioned at the interstices of different spaces, histories, and languages, Vişniec initiates not only a transcultural dialogue, but also opens a space in which an identity can be negotiated.

Keywords

Matei Vişniec, Franz Kafka, rewriting, border studies