Anna Glazova

Kafka’s Cat-Lamb: Hybridization of Genesis and Taxonomy

A passage in Kafka’s diaries contains a highly peculiar representation of the universal natural and cultural history. It combines the notion of technical progress with a vision of origin as described in the Book of Genesis:

Inventions hasten on ahead of us as the coast always hastens on ahead of the steamer, which is ceaselessly shaken by its engine. Inventions achieve all that can be achieved. It is unfair to say, for instance: The airplane does not fly like the bird, or: We shall never be capable of creating a living bird. Of course not, but the error lies in the objection, just as if the steamer were expected ever and again to arrive at its port of departure in spite of keeping on a straight course. – A bird cannot be created by means of an original act, for it is already created, is continually coming into existence as a result of the first act of Creation, and it is impossible to break into this series, created on the ground of an original, unceasing will, a living series continually showering forth; it is just as is recounted in a legend: although the first woman was created out of the man’s rib, this was never repeated, but from then on men always took to wife the daughters of others. – The method and tendency of the creation of the bird – this is the point – and the airplane need not, however, be different; and the savage’s way of interpreting things, confusing a shot from a gun with a roll of thunder, may have a limited truth.¹

Technical progress is described here from the modern scientific perspective, whereas the story of the human origin refers to the creation of Adam and Eve as it appears in the Book Bereshit.² Kafka invents here a hybrid of a specific Jewish metaphysical narrative and a modern, universal scientific belief. Progress, in Kafka’s understanding, is the unfolding of the original will – which is synonymous with the will to unfold – and thus history as a whole can be understood as a progression of individual creatures and creations (in the sense of Erfindungen, “inventions”) related to each other, even if their individual geneses become forgotten and unreconstructable. As an example, Kafka traces the genesis of birds and airplanes to a common origin. Airplanes are not born of birds, and yet, from a certain point of view, they are descendants of birds – not in blood and not so

much in shape as in the same will that is responsible for flying forms. The phylogeny Kafka has in mind is essentially different from Darwin’s model of evolution. For Kafka, birds and airplanes are close relatives sharing the same branch on the tree of life. Darwin, in contrast, would find the very idea of a relation between a living organism and a man-made construct puzzling at best. Creatures and inventions, for Kafka, are bound by the principle of semblance, and this semblance leads back to the hidden origin of all life, which Kafka calls, in the previously noted diary entry, “the original, unceasing will.” Creatures as well as creations represent stages in the genesis of this will, and these stages give rise to a taxonomy that is based on existential facts rather than blood relations or similarities in genetic codes. In this taxonomy, airplanes stem from birds, guns from thunder, and literary creations can be traced to the same root of the universal tree of life. As Kafka notes in his diary, “Tree of life – lord of life.”3 Everything that exists, be it an animal, a vehicle, or a literary invention, springs forth from this same tree.

This model of genesis is particularly recognizable in Kafka’s stories about animals and inanimate creatures, all of whom occupy a place directly next to humans in Kafka’s taxonomy — creatures like the ape-human Red Peter, the childlike wooden spool Odradek, and the crossbreed of cat and lamb who sheds human tears of compassion. This genus of creatures has a common predecessor, a hybrid of hound and donkey from a dream that Kafka records in his diary in 1911:

I dreamed today of a donkey that looked like a greyhound, it was very cautious in its movements. I looked at it closely because I was aware how unusual a phenomenon it was, but remember only that its narrow human feet could not please me because of their length and uniformity. I offered it a bunch of fresh, dark-green cypress leaves which I had just received from an old Zürich lady (it all took place in Zürich), it did not want it, just sniffed a little at it; but then, when I left the cypress on a table, it devoured it so completely that only a scarcely recognizable kernel resembling a chestnut was left. Later there was talk that this donkey had never yet gone on all fours but always held itself erect like a human being and showed its silvery shining breast and its little belly. But actually that was not correct.4

Kafka sees this creature in a dream on the night following an evening spent in the Jewish theater together with his friend Yitzhak Löwy, whose last name is essentially identical to that of Kafka’s maternal uncle Joseph Loewy. Kafka felt close to both men, and their common surname was important for him, not only because it was shared by two people whom he esteemed but also because of its semantic

3 Kafka, Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II, 72; Kafka, The Blue Octavo Notebooks, 37.
content (just as his own surname is a homophone of “kavka,” the Czech term for a jackdaw). We know from Kafka’s notorious “Letter to the Father” (“Brief an den Vater”) that he felt torn between his paternal and maternal bloodlines, the Kafkas and the Loewys, respectively. He depicts the mild and non-offensive Loewys as the precise opposite of the assertive and easily irritable Kafkas.

But being born into the Kafka-Loewy household was also to be born into a linguistic reality co-defined by these two conflicting names. Werner Hamacher shows in his imaginative analysis of names and the naming power in Kafka’s texts that the discrepancy between the two names, Kafka and Loewy, serves as a model for the creature in the short story “A Crossbreed” (“Eine Kreuzung”). Since the word “Kafka” means “jackdaw” in Czech and the name Loewy derives from “Löwe,” or “lion,” being a child of Kafka and Loewy entails, if the names are taken literally, being both a bird and a cat, that is, prey and predator simultaneously. This is the existential condition of the cat-lamb in Kafka’s story: it “flees cats” and “wants to assault lambs.” Its conflicted double-nature tears it apart; yet this conflict, as Hamacher shows, originates in Kafka’s language and in the logic of his literary production, where the figurative pairs with the non-figurative, making it impossible to interpret metaphors, as each undermines its own metaphoric content. Following this observation, Hamacher shifts the focus of his analysis away from the figure of the hybrid and towards the underlying problem of the hybridization of language, in which proper names transform into general terms and general terms mixed with names lose their signifying function. This hybridization allows Kafka to work towards the disintegration of linguistic means of representation, but also to work in anticipation that this disintegration may give rise to some new, unprecedented form of language. Taking this analysis as my starting point, I would like to linger on the logic of hybridization of names and figures in Kafka’s stories.

It is true that the Czech word “kavka” happens to mean “jackdaw” and that Franz’s father, Hermann Kafka, was well aware of this when he chose a figure of a jackdaw for an emblem of his store’s sign-plate. It is also true, however, that the surname Kafka derives from the biblical name Jacob and its Yiddish diminutive form, Kovka. This proper name mantels itself in a familiar general term in

---


order to enter the sphere of a language – Czech, in this instance – by means of homophony. In this transformation the name becomes a nomad between languages, homeless among proper names as much as among ordinary nouns. Precisely this is the fate of the homeless name and figure called Odradek in Kafka’s story “The Cares of the Family Man” (“Die Sorge des Hausvaters”). “A Crossbreed” also tells a story of a nomad, except this nomad is not a traveler but rather a host for a nomadic origin within its own body. This creature has no place in the taxonomy of living things, because its creation is still en route: “it only developed in my time; formerly it was far more lamb than kitten.” The narration captures the moment in the history of its development when the two fighting natures within its body are in a balance: “Now it is both in about equal parts.” The genesis of the creature is exactly half-completed but it remains unclear what further development would bring and whether the animal would become only a cat, only a lamb, or something else entirely. This literary invention, Kafka’s cat-lamb, is a figure of thought that pairs a notion of natural history with a notion of an ahistorical origin within it. Creation, from the perspective of this story, is not only an ongoing process; it is also a process that is intrinsically bound to history yet that does not share history’s linear progression. Widely diverging branches on the phylogenetic tree reveal themselves as potential origins of another degree. Kafka formulates this thought laconically, noting in his diary that “Adam’s first domestic pet after the expulsion from paradise was the serpent.”7 This thought establishes an alternative genetic succession, in which all pets and livestock are offspring of the snake – a succession as wildly divergent from Darwin’s view as from the biblical Genesis. In Kafka’s succession, cats and lambs appear to be as easily crossbred as horses and donkeys.

The specificity of the hybrid in Kafka’s story is that its phylogenesis is unfinished and, as long as it remains unfinished, secures a succession of generations: the creature, though it does not (and probably cannot) have progeny, is a “piece of heirloom” (Erbstück) that ensures a continuation of heritage in the narrator’s family, even if this continuation comes as a personal sacrifice for the creature. If all pets and livestock are offspring of the original sin – itself mediated by one particular animal, the snake – then, as Kafka’s aphorism suggests, the cat-lamb must likewise have a specific place in this natural history of human and animal co-existence. From the little that Kafka tells us, we know that at least a partial destiny of this crossbreed is to become a sacrificial animal. He writes, “Perhaps the knife of the butcher would be a redemption (Erlösung) for this animal.” As long as the animal remains unscathed, no redemption can seal its destiny, and nothing in the

7 Kafka, Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II, 65; Kafka, The Blue Octavo Notebooks, 33.
common destiny of humans and sacrificial animals can be changed; the animal will remain sinful. If we take for granted that the family history of the cat-lamb and its owner is a Jewish history, we can situate Kafka’s cat-lamb on the ladder of Jewish living things; however, this requires that we first consider both the role that lambs play in Judaism and in related monotheisms, as well as the Halakhic status of crossbreeds.

Sheep are sacrificial animals in many traditions. All Abrahamic monotheisms respect this exclusive status of sheep, and one such sacrifice lies at the very foundation of Judaism, namely, in the narrative of the Aqedah. After Abraham is tested and called to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, a ram appears miraculously in the bushes on the Mount Moriah; Abraham is ordered to sacrifice the animal instead of Isaac. After this test, Abraham becomes the arch-patriarch of the Jewish tradition, as his son later becomes a father and there follows a sequence of generations. In this story, a ram enters between the father and his child and has to give its life, so that the child can live. There is a similar constellation in Kafka’s story, except that the sacrifice seems to have gone entirely awry. The narrator inherits an animal that wants to be sacrificed but cannot be, precisely because it is a piece of inheritance. What if Abraham had not killed that ram found in the bushes of Mount Moriah? Would he have walked it back home and given it as a pet to his son? Would this animal, whose miraculous appearance was caused by divine intervention, have been mortal or would it have continued living until the entirety of human (or Jewish) history had run its course? Kafka’s story reads like a narrative of one of the possible futures of this ram. The fatal change in the procedure of the sacrifice has caught up with the lamb and imprinted itself on the animal’s body, just as the original sin became imprinted in the body of the snake, who is cursed to crawl on its stomach. The sacrificial lamb who has failed to be sacrificed becomes haunted by original sin. After the expulsion from paradise, lambs and lions no longer live in peace with each other, at least not until the world of creation is redeemed, as the prophet Isiah envisioned. In the current – sinful – world, lions hunt lambs; the unsacrificed lamb, however, is torn from within by its natural predator, and seems to retain some memory that it was supposed to have been sacrificed. Its desire to be butchered does not remain secret to the man, to whose household the lamb belongs; but it is precisely because the fatal mistake of the unfinished sacrifice has become a part of the family history that this solution is no longer possible, at least not until the family line ends. The animal cannot stop wanting to be sacrificed, yet its owner cannot kill it, because both stand in a relation of guilt toward each other that remains the same, no matter how much the animal and the human may change. This is why the cat-lamb’s owner considers questions about the existence of this piece of his inheritance inadequate: its existence is inseparable from the existence of the owner himself. “[T]he strangest
questions are asked, which no human being could answer: Why there is only one such animal, why I rather than anybody else should own it, whether there was ever an animal like it before and what would happen if it died, whether it feels lonely, why it has no children, what it is called, etc.” These questions are, like the question of human origin, impossible to answer.

The relation of guilt between the owner and the cat-lamb replaces the sacrifice. When the intended offering is not presented, it manifests itself in what the owner calls “heiliger Schutz” (“sacred protection”): “It remains faithful to the family that brought it up. In that there is certainly no extraordinary mark of fidelity, but merely the true instinct of an animal which, though it has countless step-relations in the world, has perhaps not a single blood relation, and to which consequently the protection it has found with us is sacred.” The animal has no blood relatives, because its blood remains reserved for a blood offering that never transpired. It can have no other blood relation to anyone or anything on the tree of life except for the relation to the family who owes its blood and owns it. From the perspective of the Halakhic rules, the blood of one such crossbreed would not be kosher; thus no ritual slaughter of this animal could occur within the legal bounds prescribed by the Jewish law.

There are good reasons to believe that as Kafka wrote this story he had in mind the rules of kosher slaughter. He and Yitzhak Löwy may have recently discussed shechita (ritualistic slaughter), and it is beyond doubt that together they had seen a play that alludes to the ritualistic slaughter. In a diary note from 24 November 1911, Kafka mentions Jacob Gordin’s play *Di shkhite* [*The Slaughter*] and records quotations from the Talmud that appear in this play. A member of Kafka’s family, his paternal grandfather, Jakob Kafka, had been a ritual slaughterer. Kafka, who was a vegetarian, once noted in a letter: “my grandfather on the paternal side was a butcher in a village near Strakonitz; I have to not eat as much meat as he has slaughtered.”

A similarly strange food economy is the fate of the cat-lamb: the creature can survive only on milk, because its lamb-half cannot eat meat and its cat-half cannot eat grass. It is remarkable, too, that in this same letter Kafka labels his lack of musical talent “a piece of heirloom” (“ein Erbstück der

---

Vorfahren”), repeating an expression from “A Crossbreed,” in which the cat-lamb is identified as “a piece of heirloom” (“ein Erbstück”).

The cat-lamb, being a hybrid of a feline and a ruminant, could not be eaten by people. The Mosaic law prescribes that certain animals may be eaten, some may not, and some may not even be touched. The list of clean and unclean animals in Deuteronomy 14:5 contains a hapax legomenon, which has led to various diverging speculations about the species in question. The name of the animal as it appears in the Tanakh is זָמֶר (zamer); this animal is, according to the Mosaic law, kosher, like other cloven-hoofed ruminants. The current consensus is to identify the zamer as a wild sheep (Ammotragus tragelaphus). Because the exact species has never been identified with certainty, translators of the Bible have faced considerable difficulty in finding an adequate translation. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate translate zamer as “camelopard,” likely deriving this word from Pliny’s Naturalis Historia, where the word stands for “giraffe.” The giraffe, however, could hardly be the zamer of the Tanakh, as it is most unlikely that this animal, native to Central and South Africa, would have presented much of a concern to the Rabbinic authorities of the time. Despite the eventual clarification and the resulting general agreement to identify the zamer as a wild sheep, the history of its shape-shifting has left a trace in the Halakhic tradition. The Greek and Latin translations mentioning the giraffe provoked discussion among rabbis as to the animal’s Halakhic status. The giraffe does fulfill the criteria for being kosher, though this hardly means that it will ever become a staple product. Interestingly, the question of whether giraffe meat is kosher has become a bit of a new lore in contemporary Israel. The profane curiosity most commonly associated with giraffe slaughter concerns where to cut the neck. The rabbinic authority response to this is simple: “anywhere.”

Giraffe’s meat is kosher meat yet that of the “camelopard,” the name given to the giraffe by Pliny and later adopted by Linnaeus, is not. The giraffe’s name in modern binomial nomenclature is Giraffa camelopardalis, a designation that reflects Pliny’s belief that the animal was a crossbreed of camel and leopard, with the hooves of an ungulate and the spotted fur of a feline. As such, should a half-camel half-cat animal ever exist, it would be unquestionably non-kosher, according to the Halakhic rules. It is curious that the kosher zamer’s non-kosher modern name “camelopard” has become part of the Biblical tradition, passing through translation into Greek and Latin with a detour through Pliny. It is even more

---

9 The Jewish Encyclopedia, Funk and Wagnalls, New York 1906. The complete articles are now available online. See also the page on “chamois” (the translation of zamer in the King James Bible): http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4227-chamois
curious, though, that this same tradition has the need to classify this animal – born, as it were, in translation – in accordance with the Halakhic order of things.

The Talmud mentions a creature that, like the cat-lamb, is a transitory life form, whose Halakhic status changes when it reaches maturity. This is a dirt-mouse: a mouse whose hind legs, until fully formed, are dirt, indivisible from the earth. There are at least two instances when the dirt-mouse is invoked, one in Chullin 9:10: “A mouse [achbar] which is half flesh and half earth; if someone touches the flesh part, he becomes tamei [unclean]; if he touches the earth part, he remains tahor [clean]”; and in Sanhedrin 91a: “A certain sectarian said to Rabbi Ami: You say that the dead will live again – but they become dust, and can dust come alive? He replied… Go out to the field and see the rodent that one day is half flesh and half earth, and on the next day it has transformed into a creeping creature and has become entirely flesh.”10 As long as one can differentiate between the mouse’s two parts, the question of its Halakhic status is easily answered. One cannot say this about Kafka’s cat-lamb, because its two halves cannot be differentiated with certainty. Furthermore, cat and lamb do not seem to be the only two natures fighting for the creature’s body. There is something dog-like about it, even human-like: it has “the ambitions of a human being.” When the narrator notes that it “simply cannot be parted from me” and that its place of choice is “lying on my loins,” the animal indeed appears to be of one flesh with him. The hybridization of the animal affects even its human owner. Divided as it is within its own body, the creature has no place within the taxonomy of the Judaic animals.

Like the camelopard of Deuteronomy, the dirt-mouse of the Talmud does not have a corresponding life form in Linnaean taxonomy. It has been suggested, however, that the dirt-mouse ended up being mentioned in the Talmudic tractate through Greek and Roman sources (Diodorus Siculus and Pliny the Elder, among others).11 These sources, of course, had no rabbinic authority as such. Yet Diodorus’s authority as a natural historian was revered even by the rabbis, so much so that they became concerned with a creature not mentioned in the Tanakh. If a dirt-mouse indeed existed, it would be imperative to define its Halakhic status. This much stands to reason. Less comprehensible is that this

---

creature, whose existence was supported only by anecdotal evidence from a Greek source, somehow burrowed its way into the Talmud. If the law prescribes a particular Halakhic status to the dirt-mouse, it must also, by necessity, assume that a dirt-mouse actually exists; otherwise, the animal would be of no interest to scholars of Jewish law. The law prescribes that the flesh part of the dirt-mouse is unclean, thereby establishing that the dirt-mouse does indeed exist. Diodorus’s description may well have referred to an animal identifiable within the Linnaean system (modern scholars suggest a jerboa); however, the dirt-mouse of Mishnah, having been defined as “legal,” can no longer be assimilated into any scientific taxonomy. Like its “cousin” the camelopard of the Septuagint, the dirt-mouse entered into Halakhah through a door in Greek natural history, via cross-cultural inclusion. Kafka’s cat-lamb, “an animal which, though it has countless step-relations in the world, has perhaps not a single blood relation,” entered into the order of creatures that are “step-relations” of those belonging to Linnaean taxonomy (such as lambs or cats), but only by means of language. The cat-lamb – a mix of predator and ruminant, and thus, in the Halakhic perspective, an abomination – is a crossbreed whose flesh is essentially and entirely language.

12 Jorge Luis Borges, a dedicated reader of Kafka, explored fantastic creatures as well as fantastic classifications of real animals. In his Book of Imaginary Beings [El libro de los seres imaginarios], Borges collected concise descriptions of mystical creatures from antiquity to modern times. The book contains, among others, the barometz, a hybrid of lamb and plant, described by Pliny the Elder, and Kafka’s “Crossbreed,” which is cited in its entirety. Furthermore, Borges, in his short story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” [“El idioma analítico de John Wilkins”], invented a Chinese encyclopedia entitled “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge,” which offers a fantastic taxonomy of animals arranged according to no principle save the author’s imagination. All animals in this “encyclopedia” are divided into the following categories: “Those that belong to the emperor; Embalmed ones; Those that are trained; Suckling pigs; Mermaids (or Sirens); Fabulous ones; Stray dogs; Those that are included in this classification; Those that tremble as if they were mad; Innumerable ones; Those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush; Et cetera; Those that have just broken the flower vase; Those that, at a distance, resemble flies” (see Jorge Luis Borges, “John Wilkins’ Analytical Language,” in Selected Nonfictions, trans. Eliot Weinberger, Penguin Books, New York 1999, 229–232, 231). Besides thematizing hybridization in its narrative, this text, as are many by Borges, is an example of a hybridization of common genres: the essay genre, which is supported by facts, quotations, and references, undergoes a crossing with the genre of the fantastic short story. Some interpreters take Borges’s fantastic figures to be references to actual sources and have sought to locate them among existing books. Thus, these interpretations have a similar fate as that of the word zamer in its translations: pieces of scientific knowledge become mixed with a generous portion of free imagination.
account of natural history. Most of this development occurs in the transitory zone between languages, and it is precisely this transitory zone that is the place of abode of Kafka’s Odradek, who is homeless in at least two languages, German and Czech. Kafka’s writings present at least one other invented creature whose place on the tree of living things remains unknown. Unlike with Odradek, this animal’s place of abode is entirely definite; in contrast to the cat-lamb, however, its relation to people is veiled and unclear. This creature, as described by Kafka in an unpublished fragment (likely written in 1922), belongs to a place rather than to an owner:

In our synagogue there lives an animal about the size of a marten. One can often see it very well; it allows people to approach to a distance of about two meters. It is pale blue-green in color. Nobody has ever yet touched its fur, and so nothing can be said about it, and one might almost go as far as to assert that the real color of its fur is unknown, perhaps the color one sees stems only from the dust and mortar with which its fur is matted, and indeed the color does resemble that of the paint inside the synagogue, only it is a little brighter.

It is asserted that the animal would stay here even if the building were no longer being used as a synagogue. It is also related that generations ago someone had attempted to banish the animal; the proposed action, however, had introduced problems pertaining to Halakhic regulations:

There is evidence that at that time the question whether the presence of such an animal might be tolerated in the house of God was investigated from the point of view of the religious laws. Opinions were sought from various celebrated rabbis, views were divided, the majority were for the expulsion of the animal and a reconsecration of the house of God. But it was easy to issue decrees from afar, in reality it was simply impossible to banish the animal.13

If the cat-lamb in the earlier story is the token both of the family’s continued history and of its inheritance, the blue-green creature of the synagogue14 has a history preceding the community of people who, in relation to this creature,
appear to be its guests rather than its owners. Precisely for the reason that the animal’s genesis precedes the foundation of the synagogue, the Halakhic regulations prove inadequate for defining its status and proper place. Walter Benjamin, though he would not have seen this fragment at the time, recognized that animals in Kafka’s stories were representatives of an order preceding the systematized view of creation in Judaism. As Benjamin observed, in 1931, in his notes for an unwritten essay on Kafka:

\[G\]anz verschollen ist \[die prähistorische Stufe der Menschheit\] in der Torah nicht. Die Reinigungs- und Speisegesetze beziehen sich auf eine Vorwelt, von der nichts mehr erhalten ist als diese Abwehrmaßnahmen gegen sie.

[The prehistoric stage of humanity has not gone completely missing in the Torah. The laws of purification and food preparation refer to a pre-world, from which there remains nothing besides these mechanisms of defense against it.]

The cat-lamb is not only an abomination from the point of view of the Halakha because it is an unclean animal; the problem also lies in the heterogeneity of its nature. The animal’s two taxonomic identifications are mixed to the extent that no part of its body can be discerned as clean or unclean. The transitory nature of its existence sets it beyond the taxonomy of creatures; taxonomy is powerless in the face of mixed origins. Kafka’s furry creature, because of its birthright, renders this same taxonomy powerless: its existence in the synagogue is primogenital in relation to the Jewish community with its set of beliefs and laws. In this text it is the community, rather than the animal, that exists in a transitory state. The community must adopt their fellow tenant, even if its nature does not fit within the taxonomy defined by the community’s laws. Either way, the transition as such appears to be problematic for laws and regulations. Kafka investigates pre-
cisely this transitory zone in order to reach the critical point, at which the law, as the tool of systematization, loses its ability to separate and define. Benjamin terms this transitory zone *die Vorwelt* [pre-world]. Yet there is no going back to the prehistoric stage, when the powers of the pre-world were not yet contained by and within laws; thus, there is no access to the origin of these laws. In order to describe the world together with its origin hidden in the depths of the pre-world, Kafka collapses in his texts the law with what it seeks to regulate. The blue-green creature of the synagogue does not, as such, give birth to the generations of Jews inhabiting the building; it does, however, reference a time when the future of this Jewish community was only germinating. The animal is not the community’s progenitor and yet it signifies the prehistoric stage in its world. As in Benjamin’s note about the laws and regulations of the Torah, the animal in Kafka’s story survives as a sign of the Jewish community’s prenatal stage without disclosing anything about its own origin. The animal and the community have a common history without sharing a common genesis and yet they are related – not by blood but by history – through something hidden in their pre-history. This logic can be extended to Kafka’s literary practice as a whole. His literary inventions resemble a crossbreed of a bird and an airplane: the history, natural and cultural, that separates them on the chronological scale abbreviates their genesis without answering as to where the origin of the inherent will for such hybridization is to be sought. Kafka’s prose gives shape to this abbreviation.

Origin and continuation, as Kafka shows in the passage (on technical progress) cited at the beginning of this article, stand in a paradoxical relation to each other. On one hand, origin defines the sequence of what originates from it; on the other, origin is unlike any other element in this sequence and thus is excluded from it. In mathematics, for example, zero is unlike any other number and thus a special set of rules applies exclusively to it. Kafka explains this mechanism through the example of Eve, the first woman. She, unlike any other woman in history, was born from Adam’s rib; being the first woman, she gives birth to the generations to come but her own birth remains unrepeatable and exclusive to her alone. In order to generate a sequence, one must be or become excluded from it.

This logic is reflected in the story of Abraham and Isaac as re-told repeatedly by Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot, too, like Kafka in his story “A Crossbreed,” speaks about an animal’s sacrifice for a human family’s sake and alludes to Abraham’s sacrifice. This allusion appears in Blanchot’s works at least three times: in two

---

forbidden animals were species that escaped being classified.” See Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature*, vii. I thank Mikhail Iampolskii for this reference.
essays on Kafka and in a short story. In the latter, entitled *At the Desired Moment [Au moment voulu]*, Blanchot writes:

> When Abraham came back from the country of Moriah, he was not accompanied by his child but by the image of a ram, and it was with a ram that he had to live from then on. Others saw the son in Isaac, because they didn’t know what had happened on the mountain, but he saw the ram in his son, because he made a ram for himself out of his child. A devastating story [histoire accablante].

“Accablante,” from “accabler,” traces to “katabole,” the Greek word meaning “laying down,” in the sense of both “laying a foundation” but also, metaphorically, the physiological act of conception. In view of this etymology, Blanchot’s words “histoire accablante” characterize the Aqedah as a story (or a history) of Abraham sacrificing his right to found a family and tradition rather than proving this right. In order to start the sequence of generations and become the arch-patriarch of the Jewish people, Abraham must be excluded from this very succession. Just as Eve, the mother of all women, can have no mother herself, so too Abraham, in Blanchot’s version, can be the father of all Jewish sons only if he gives up his own son. We know the story of the Biblical Abraham’s life prior to his journey to Moriah and thus we know that he does not stand outside human history; Blanchot’s point in his description of the Aqedah is that God’s demand to sacrifice Isaac tears Abraham from the generations’ succession. If Abraham sacrifices his only son, he will cede all hope of becoming the forefather for generations

---

17 My focus in this article is specific to the problem of mixed origin, human and animal, in Kafka’s prose, and my reading thus limits itself to the discussion of the constellation involving Isaac and the ram. Chris Danta’s excellent book-length study of the Aqedah in Kafka, Blanchot, and Kierkegaard offers a much more detailed analysis of Kafka’s and Blanchot’s respective versions of the Biblical story. See Chris Danta, *Literature Suspends Death: Sacrifice and Storytelling in Kierkegaard, Kafka and Blanchot*, Continuum, New York 2011.


19 The word occurs several times in the New Testament and always, with only one exception, in the expression “από καταβολής κόσμου,” “from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 13:35; Matthew 25:34; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 4:3; Hebrews 9:26; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8; Revelation 17:8). The only exception is Hebrews 11:11, where the word occurs in connection to Isaac’s conception: “Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised [Πίστει καὶ αὐτὴ Σάρρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολήν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν καὶ παρὰ καιρὸν ἡλικίας ἔτεκεν, ἐπεὶ πιστὸν ἦγεσεν τὸν ἐπαγγελματίαν].” It is not clear, however, whether Blanchot explicitly intended this use of the word “accablante” to be an allusion to its Biblical precursors and the Aqedah or whether the link is incidental.
of Jews, and yet it is precisely his willingness to sacrifice this future that renders him, in God’s eyes, worthy of becoming the Jewish arch-patriarch.

This paradox of sacrificing the future for the future’s sake recurs in a later text by Blanchot, “Kafka and the Work’s Demand” (from 1958), where he explains to a fuller extent that Abraham’s sacrifice concerns waiving his belief in the future, for the sake of his son’s future and for the future sons:

What is demanded of Abraham is not only that he sacrifice his son, but God himself. The son is God’s future on earth, for it is time which is the Promised Land – the true, the only dwelling place of the chosen people and of God in his people. Yet Abraham, by sacrificing his only son, must sacrifice time, and time sacrificed will certainly not be given back in the eternal beyond. The beyond is nothing other than the future, the future of God in time. The beyond is Isaac.20

Kafka, as Blanchot explains here, faces a paradox similar to Abraham’s. In order to be able to write, he must sacrifice his belief in being a writer. This comparison also appears in Blanchot’s “Kafka and Literature” (from 1949):

As soon as [the writer] starts writing, he is within literature and he is there completely: he has to be a good artisan, but he also has to be a word seeker, an image seeker. He is compromised. That is his fate. Even the famous instances of total sacrifice change nothing in this situation. To master literature with the sole aim of sacrificing it? But that assumes that what one sacrifices exists. So one must first believe in literature, believe in one’s literary calling, make it exist – to be a writer of literature and to be it to the end. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, but what if he was not sure that he had a son, and what he took for his son was really just a ram?21

Blanchot knew Kafka’s own variations of the Aqedah from a letter Kafka had written to Robert Klopstock22; however, Blanchot’s comparison of Kafka and Abraham has little to do with these variations, or at least not directly. The parallel he draws emphasizes one sole aspect: both Abraham and Kafka are not sure whether they exist in the only respective quality that, for each, has the utmost existential meaning: Abraham as father, Kafka as writer. In Blanchot’s baffling description, Kafka’s existence as a writer is firmly rooted in the very uncertainty as to whether he is able to enter the realm of literary tradition, whereas Abra-

ham’s existence as a father is rooted in his uncertainty about whether he does indeed have a son. This uncertainty, for Blanchot, contains the true essence of sacrifice. Isaac must become a ram in Abraham’s doubting eyes so that he (Isaac) can remain human in the eyes of others; Abraham himself must reduce his son to an animal so as to exclude him from the progression of sons born of sons and thus establish himself as the original arch-patriarch. With this procedure Abraham becomes dissolved in the origin of this progression. “The desired moment” – “un moment voulu,” in Blanchot’s formulation – is the zero point in this sequence, the moment of founding a history of the Jewish people. The will to originate embodied by Abraham lies at the foundation of this sequence and projects itself into the future.

Blanchot, like Kafka, seeks to capture in his narration the border between the animal and the human. To become human, the human must step beyond being just animal, that is, the human must make a conscious choice to sacrifice willingly in response to God’s calling. This ethical dimension in the relation of man to God forms the core of Judaism. Abraham incorporates the ethical principle of choosing God and being chosen by God, in that he chooses to sacrifice his own flesh and blood, Isaac. Blanchot claims that this is possible only if Abraham reduces Isaac to mere flesh and blood, that is, if he sees him as just a living organism, an animal rather than an individual capable of his own choices. Blanchot’s version of the Aqedah is a narration in which the human is separated from the animal at the precise moment when the separating line is drawn by Abraham’s sacrificial knife.

Kafka’s story about the cat-lamb-dog-human is an invention of a hybrid whose body as a whole encloses the demarcation between the human and the animal. Within its body the common origin of the human and of the animal lies hidden. The border between the animal and the human natures cannot be located and described, as it is not possible to identify the exact evolutionary moment when humans became a separate species. Humanity does not remember its origin, just as no person remembers his or her own birth. It is possible, however, to include this critical moment in a narration about human origin and humans’ separation from animals. The same can be said, too, about being Jewish. It is not possible to draw a separating line in one’s nature between what is Jewish and what is universally human. It is possible, though, to live a life doubting the existence of this very division, as did Kafka. His doubt became the foundation of his existence and the source of his literary inspiration. Moreover, his doubt about whether there was
anything Jewish about his literary creation made him into a writer whose works embody the impossibility and necessity of choosing to be Jewish as much as that of choosing to be human.

**Works Cited**


---
