

Kafka and Buber

Testimony and Impossibility

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“I also talked to Buber yesterday; as a person he is lively and simple and remarkable, and seems to have nothing to do with the lukewarm things he has written” – wrote Franz Kafka to his fiancée Felice Bauer in the early 1913. What is the meaning of this harsh, yet respectful portraiture of Buber? Was it a casual ironic remark – or was it rather the way Kafka really thought of Martin Buber? And to what extent was Kafka important for Buber? How can we understand the collaboration between the writer and philosopher? Close reading, contextualization and *Begegnungseignis* (encounter as fundamental event). | Keywords: *Kafka, Buber, Uchronic Thinking, Remembering the Future, Encounter, Testimony*

Confession and lies are one and the same. In order to confess, one tells lies. One cannot express what one is, for that is precisely what one is; one can communicate only what one is not, that is, lies. Only in the chorus there may be a certain truth.

(Kafka, 1954, p. 308; the translation is slightly revised)

1.

Is it possible, when it comes to confessing and witnessing in an abstract sense, to avoid adopting a personal perspective? It sure is – but it would be in vain. Due to inquiries into uchronia, uchronic thinking, and uchronic intellectual history, I have not been able to find interest in almost anything else recently, but in the crossroads, or clashes of testimony, possibility and impossibility. The missed, or never expected opportunities, the cross-referential relationship between opportunity and the actual state of affairs, and the all-encompassing, reflective account of these, the testimony, and its possible nature.

First, let me provide an account of two instances of my personal involvement with testimony and impossibility. I'll begin with the earliest one: a few years ago, having finished my dissertation, I realized in awe that it should have been written a hundred years earlier, by the young – and therefore, still 'good' –

Lukács, and, naturally, in German. However, this would have been impossible for many reasons. The central aim of the dissertation was to examine the extent to which Dostoevsky, especially his novel *Demons*, had influenced Nietzsche in his later years, most of all his specific concept of nihilism – and, as it later turned out, it did, to a great extent. The complex, comparative study of this relationship was very much in the air towards the end of the *Belle Époque*, and we can mention here the works of Brandes (1889) or those of Shestov (1969), but it became clear to me while reading Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* and especially his *Notes on Dostoevsky* that this interrelationship could have been the great theme of Lukács in his planned book on Dostoevsky. He should have 'only' elaborated on his idea that Nietzsche, so to speak, is a mere Hebbelian-Hegelian sidetrack in a larger European context, but that the supremacy of the anthropological atheism of Kirillov-Nietzsche in opposition to the merely cosmological European atheism is obvious. (Lukács, 2009, p. 271 ff.)¹ However, producing a 'serious' full-fledged text on this subject would have been impossible at the time for a multiplicity of reasons, especially for philological ones: the contemporary philological inquiries into Nietzsche and Dostoevsky were quite far from being ideal. However, after a century – and, to deploy a postmodern cliché, with the end of great theories and narratives – such an endeavour might turn into a philological summary and/or mere infotainment.

The other personal aspect that is important to mention is very closely related to the present paper itself, since the original version of this text, which I have modified to some extent, was supposed to be presented at the Péter Losonczi Memorial Conference in the summer of 2016. (Losonczi, who has passed away prematurely, was a representative of the contemporary middle generation of Hungarian philosophers.) Eventually, the paper's fate took an unusual turn, since I was not able to attend the conference, resulting in one less personal testimony, but the original paper was still presented by helpful intermediaries.²

It is certainly true that we may often have a sense of 'belated testimony' in our strained efforts to make sense of the world, that is, those of us who are concerned with the humanities. It often seems that we are at the wrong place at the wrong time – and that we are lacking the essential skill that is ever so important in love and politics: good timing. I am not certain that Minerva's owl departs *only* at dusk, but she sure comes late. Albeit, I do not say this in an apprehensive, or fatalist tone, since I do believe, to paraphrase William James, that if man did not spend his whole life on a quest for the superfluous, he would never have established himself as inexpugnably as he has done in the necessary (James, 1897, p. 131).

Approaching our present subjects, Kafka and Buber, I wish to examine thoroughly the passage I quoted at the beginning of my paper that simultaneously illuminates the subject of testimony and impossibility, or, more precisely, the impossibility of true testimony. I found this passage a relatively

¹ No full English translation of the Notes has yet been published.

² Also published here: Pannonhalmi Szemle, 2016 XXIV/3., 66–72. See Czeglédi (2016).

long time ago – and Péter Losonczi has played more than a small part in this discovery. Let me recount this story, before we proceed to somehow make sense of the sentence itself.

Péter, who was well-known for his capabilities as an organizer and as someone who prepares and mediates important encounters between people, organized a big conference on Buber, back in the mid-1990s. The reason for the symposium, taking place at the Merlin Theater of Budapest, was the recent release of Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* in Hungarian, published by Atlantisz Press. After all these years, I have sharp recollections of three presenters – György Tatár, our highly influential professor, and two mutual friends of ours: Zoltán Hidas and Ágoston Schmelowszky. It was clear from the beginning that Tatár would talk about Gershom Scholem's criticism of Buber, while Hidas would draw parallels between the philosophical insights of Kierkegaard and Buber. Schmelowszky may have talked about the Hasidic tales themselves, edited by Buber, but I can no longer remember his exact topic.

What I do remember vividly, however, is my embarrassment: Péter has, once again, come up with a great idea, and – to be honest, a very atypical behaviour among scholars of humanities coming up with great ideas – he was able to substantiate it. We were attending this imposing conference, and many of my peers had already found a way to contribute to it. I, on the other hand, was quite unsure about how to satisfyingly fit in, given my philosophical interests at the time, which included, among other things, research on Nietzsche. A thin link to *Zarathustra* would have been obvious: Eastern Europe being a place of mystical interconnectedness, it was Buber who almost first translated the first part of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* into Polish – but somehow, I was not keen on the idea.

Therefore, I was trying to do something completely different, only it was not clear to me what this different topic should be. Then, I somehow opened a collection of Kafka's diaries and letters. All of a sudden, the following passage caught my eye:

I also talked to Buber yesterday; as a person he is lively and simple and remarkable, and seems to have nothing to do with the lukewarm things he has written. (Kafka, 1973, p. 161)³

Finally, I ended up with addressing a different topic in my conference paper (Buber as an 'anarchist', the archaic actuality of his *Paths in Utopia*, and its relation to Buber's philosophy of dialogue), but Kafka's statement has been hunting me ever since.

Let us have a look at the so-called facts, of which we know since Nietzsche that they do not exist on their own, since they are themselves mere interpretations. The excerpt is from a letter, written by Kafka to his betrothed, Felice Bauer on January 19, 1913. The letter itself is only a minute part of a larger stream of letters written by Kafka to Felice, for which he had even given up keeping his diaries for almost half a year – diaries which were hitherto of utmost

³ Translation is slightly revised.

importance to him. One can even deem this to be a hiatus in this trace of the perhaps most exciting period of Kafka's whole life. Exciting, because of his incredible productivity as an author at the time: his first book titled *Contemplation* was published, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Judgement* and *Amerika/Lost in America* were written during this period, while he also wrote extensive letters.

No delight is without consequences, however.

The growing stream of letters to Felice (more than 300 in the first 11 months of their relationship) began to consume his literary capabilities, and Kafka felt that he had to choose between 'life' (as in a life shared with Felice) and 'writing'. Their first engagement in June 1914 was broken up four weeks later – Kafka had made his choice. (Wagenbach, 1996, p. 26 f.)⁴

An important thing to note here: the fact that Felice was the recipient of the letter mentioning Buber is barely negligible. It mirrors the nature of their relationship, in which Kafka took up the role of a superior educator, a role which he often played with considerable smugness. We should also consider the phenomenon which Harold Bloom calls the 'anxiety of influence': it's as if Kafka struggled to recover how Buber's texts, and especially his *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, had fundamentally influenced his own writings, a fact that is philologically verifiable.

Anyhow, diaries were replaced by more serious writings and letters. In parallel, of course, letter writing, which never was a mere private activity for Kafka, gradually became a platform for high-level intellectual reflections. Events of Kafka's life are more easily retraceable from his letters than from the diaries, since the latter "are more like notebooks of a literary author." (Györffy, 1981, 767) Although Kafka dates the entries in his notebooks, booklets and other papers, a significant part of these later became part of the *œuvre* in their own right, since they mostly comprise short story fragments, different versions of texts later finalized, etc. - the actual diary is only an insignificant part of these writings.

The passage from Kafka quoted above has a marvellously enigmatic nature. It objectively documents a single event, the fact of his meeting and conversation with Buber on January 18. The what, the where, the excess of this dialogue remains unknown. On the other hand, there is the laconic, almost indecipherable interpretation of what has happened.

What is the real meaning of this simultaneously appreciative and even warm (since he depicts Buber as personally "lively and simple and remarkable"), yet quite ruthless (the distinction between Buber, the individual, and Buber, the author of "lukewarm things") note? What is the reason for such a judgement and attestation [allegation?] concerning Buber? Is it a momentary, ironic side note, or is it a general, decisive account of the way he thinks of Buber? And

⁴ Translation is slightly revised.

what about the other side of this narrative? What did it mean to Buber to meet Kafka?

It might be easiest to start with the latter question: Buber had always talked about Kafka with utmost reverence, considering him - unsurprisingly - as one of the most prominent intellectual figures, and it might be safe to say, as a *witnessin'* intellectual figure of his age. It should be noted that it seems as if Kafka's 'prospective' relevance, the fact that many had felt and have been recognizing ever since, that he writes about *something that is yet to come*,⁵ is less conspicuous in Buber's case. This prospective aspect of Kafka's works is relevant in the sense that in the 1960s, in the age of "realism without shores", Kafka, decades after his death, becomes one of the most authentic portraitists of social reality, the most important realist author of the era... This was the case, not only among theoreticians, but also among practicing artists. For instance, many claimed that to capture the horrors of the Holocaust, to bear testimony to this event, which is on the verge of the impossible, one must reach back to Kafka. (Joseph Losey's sadly forgotten 1976 film, *Monsieur Klein* might be a quite relevant example here, since one cannot easily decide whether he's watching a film on the Holocaust, or a Kafka-adaptation.)

To answer the first, aforementioned question regarding Kafka's attitude towards Buber - i.e. are Kafka's remarks momentary, or decisive, why does Kafka write what he writes? -, we must first clarify the extent to which Kafka was aware of Buber's intellectual background.

A practical division of Buber's intellectual life consists of three major phases (Komoróczy, 1992, 357). (1) Work on the folkloristic religion of Eastern European Jewry. (2) The translation of, and commentary on the Bible, a work which he had begun together with Rosenzweig, and finished on his own after Rosenzweig's death. (3) His work on the ethics and philosophy of dialogue. It is certain that the third phase is the best-known, since many associate Buber only with his book *I and Thou*. This magnum opus of Buber's was published merely months before Kafka's death, ten years after his letter to Felice. Of course, one may argue that the principles laid out in *I and Thou* are also present more generally throughout Buber's philosophy, but it becomes quite clear when reading Kafka's diaries, letters, and other notes that he was unconcerned with this aspect of Buber's work. Moreover, he couldn't have been aware of the Bible-translation, since it was published only after Kafka's death. Therefore, Kafka knew Buber most of all as a researcher of the Eastern, Yiddish-speaking Jewry, as the author of the *Tales of the Hasidim*.

What's more, this was the topic that affected Kafka most deeply. Similar to his

⁵ The paradox of remembering what is still to come always has, theoretically, an emancipatory aspect to it. It was inspiring to read Alpár Losoncz on the subject recently: "This is the still existent anamnestic-platonic-speculative dimension of philosophy: remembering something which we do not know, which we cannot know. This means that remembering past possibilities opens up the present, thus placing remembrance in the perspective of the future." (Losoncz, 2017, 177) This emancipatory aspect is dimly present in Kafka's case, as well - and who else could have first recognized this, but the very man associated most closely with remembering what is to come, Walter Benjamin. See also his especially magisterial conclusion of his study on Kafka, in which he analyzes *The Truth about Sancho Panza* (Benjamin, 2001, 818). It is, however, beyond any doubt that in Kafka's case, this paradox means remembering a fundamentally dark future.

friend, Max Brod, he came from a highly assimilated background; the family was made up mostly of so-called 'four-day Jews' (which means that they went to the synagogue only four times a year: on the major Jewish holidays and on Emperor Franz Joseph's birthday), who were not familiar with Hebrew liturgical texts, and wished to conform in every way to their non-Jewish surroundings. This must have been especially difficult in Prague, where the Kafka family resided, since their complex identity matrix was further complicated by tensions between Czech and German identities. In his formative as well as in his mature years, Franz Kafka showed a considerable interest in his Jewish roots. The ultimate direction and meaning of this interest are, of course, highly contested in the academic literature concerned with Kafka.

However, the passionate interest itself is quite obvious. The range of subjects Kafka was interested in extends way beyond the basic issues of identity and assimilation: he was preoccupied with many things, from Galician Yiddish theatre – he has considered his friendship with the actor Yitzchak Lowy as one of the most important relationships of his life – through the Yiddish language itself to Hebrew, which he started to study at the age of 30. In this period he was also thinking a lot about traveling to Palestine – he could never have carried out a true *Aliyah*, however, since the British Mandate of Palestine was welcoming at the time only immigrants in good health condition, and – as it is well-known – Kafka was suffering from severe tuberculosis, a condition that eventually proved to be fatal.

2.

This latter event is emphasized in an uchronic essay by Iris Bruce, titled *What if Franz Kafka had immigrated to Palestine?* (Bruce, 2016) Bruce is a specialist of Kafka, who deploys an academic style of prose in this particular essay, writing in accordance with all scientific conventions, in a manner that is eerily similar to that of Borges. The detailed essay that relies heavily on actual primary and secondary sources, recognized authors and texts, is a quasi-academic biography excerpt. Its fictional author is Hugo Immerwahr: the last name is not without meaning, referring to the presumed ever-present honesty of the narrator (and possibly to the first-ever woman to receive an academic degree from a German university); the first name is also significant, which is very likely to be a reference to Hugo Bergmann, a prominent figure of modern cultural Zionism. Bergmann was a close friend of Kafka's from their high school years; his works, and subsequent *Aliyah* had a great impact on Kafka – as mentioned in Kafka's biographies, including in this fictional-uchronic one.

Moreover, Bergmann is a unique link between Buber and Kafka. He is a devoted student and follower of Buber, and while Kafka has reservations about the master, he is enthusiastic about the works of Bergmann, especially his *Jawnee und Jerusalem* – a text which exhibits considerable influence by Buber.

Buber, in some sense, is a key intellectual figure in Bruce's fiction. Although the imagined transformative event, the point of divergence, is the result of his

moving from Berlin to Palestine with his last love, Dora Diamant, it is Buber who convinces Kafka, who lives to be old, to write again – and in Hebrew. Thus, Kafka becomes the author of *The Trial* in Ivrit, receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966. Nevertheless, he remains his actual self:

Kafka's alternative vision addresses the complexities and absurdities of contemporary realities beyond our own time and place. [...] His voice is both new and old. It is heard by many generations around the world and Israel, too: a modern, secular Jewish voice, questioning certainties, deconstructing truths, continually searching for alternate answers in climates of conflicts. (Bruce, 2016, 214)

3.

It is sure, after all, that it was this deep interest in his own Jewishness that led Kafka to get to know Buber, mostly recognized at the time as an authority on Hasidic legends and Jewish folklore. At this point, we must note that Buber's oeuvre has a fourth tenet, which, although closely related to the three phases I mentioned earlier, should be distinguished for heuristic reasons. This may be called (4) public life. As it is well-known, Buber was far from being a Dryasdust, he was not conducting research for its own sake, and was quite active in the public sphere. He was a proud and devoted Zionist, who saw Zionism, above all, as part of his cultural and intellectual work, and consistently opposed the simplified interpretations of it, never considering it to be a friend-and-foe equation – as many do politics since Carl Schmitt, for instance –, or an expression of statist, or anti-Arab sentiments, or what he saw as the self-deception of many Western and Central European Jews.⁶

It was the public figure and the Jewish folklorist, then, who was familiar with Kafka. In other words, he had to encounter the *dialectic* – what a pity, that this multilayered philosophical term has been so permanently discredited – that Buber's public and intellectual work was amalgamated, or to put it more bluntly, was one and the same. This provided a framework for criticism of Buber, which we can discover in Scholem's and even Rosenzweig's attitude towards him: despite all their respect and appreciation for Buber and their gratitude for all they had learned from him, they were disconcerted by the extent to which Buber shapes his historical research according to his worldview, especially when it comes to selecting, editing, and amending Hasidic texts. Naturally, the source of Kafka's dislike was not so *prima facie* philological, or academic, but it is, in fact, related to the basis of these criticisms, that of Buber's general outlook on the world.

⁶ Highlighting all this does in no way mean that I wish to soften, or equivocate over the political aspects of Buber's thought. Buber has, in many cases, deployed *völkisch* rhetorical devices that later became a shameful part of the national socialist vocabulary, such as Blut und Boden (blood and soil) – a fact highlighted in many cases nowadays by far-right websites to exonerate themselves. Even the great Franz Kafka Encyclopedia (Gray et al., 2005) mentions this strange parallel in its article on Buber, highlighting that there is an all-encompassing contextual difference. Although I will not explicate on this in the present footnote, it is important to note that there is an immensely interesting uchronic aspect to Buber's philosophy, a sort of intersection in which he is constantly searching for cross-temporal connections, to capture, and even actualize missed opportunities. This tendency is clearly present in his translations of the Tanakh, and this perspective may also highlight the countless directions towards which a romantic-mythical philosophical vocabulary may lead us.

But, what else do we know about these antagonistic feelings besides the excerpt from Kafka's letter to Felice?

Kafka heard Buber lecturing in 1910, at an event in the Jewish Council House of Prague, organized by the Bar Kochba Association. We know this from implicit sources (from Max Brod, and others), and from the fact that Kafka mentions having heard Buber speak before, in his 1913 letter. Buber appears for the first time not in Kafka's January 19th letter, but in another letter written to Felice three days earlier. From this earlier letter, we can learn what was on his agenda for that night: he writes about Buber's lecture on Jewish myths, which he claims would not be exciting enough on its own to get him out of his room, since he had heard Buber speak before, and Buber did not make a lasting impression. Kafka writes about always missing something from what Buber has to say – but, with a twist that is foreshadowing his later opinion on Buber, he clarifies that Buber has, after all, the ability for great things, and that he had found his *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten* quite splendid. Kafka finds a reason to go out, after all, for after Buber's lecture, a public reading by Gertrude Eysoldt had taken place, which he was keen to attend.⁷

It was three days later that Kafka wrote his letter with its strange verdict on Buber to Felice. He reveals nothing about the lecture itself, only about their first meeting and actual discussion two days later. Moreover, the letter also reveals the not insignificant detail, that his first meeting in person, although did not change it completely, but to some extent modified Kafka's formerly unfavourable opinion on Buber.

This may appear as an unusual and quite rare turn of events. In most cases, this happens the other way round: someone who amazes us intellectually in his writings might turn out to be a disappointment in person. The reverse of this happened in the present case: personal contact made Buber more favourable in Kafka's eyes. (Side note: this instance always makes me remember the wise advice of Alpár Losoncz, a Hungarian philosopher from Vojvodina: in order to save ourselves from disappointment, try to avoid meeting contemporary authors and thinkers close to our heart! Although Alpár is a contemporary thinker who is close to my heart, I do try to keep his company any time I get a chance).

So, was Kafka's ambivalent impression of Buber a lasting one?

Fundamentally, yes.

⁷ See also: Kafka (1973), 157f. Sadly, we cannot devote attention to Kafka's own 'Chineseness' here, due to space limitations. It is possible that recognizing this connection can also be attributed to Benjamin (2001). For an insightful account on the subject, see Hsia (1996). The letter quoted here is, not unlike other love letters by Kafka, multilayered and highly reflected. One can observe, reading this letter, an atmosphere of lecturing in his words. At this point of the letter, when Kafka would start discussing Buber's Chinese stories, comes a minute excursion: Kafka runs out of blotting paper, and mentions that while waiting for the ink to dry on the paper, he started reading a copy of *Sentimental Education* lying around on his table. He copies a sentence in French from the book: "Elle avoua qu'elle désirait faire un tour à son bras, dans les rues" (Flaubert, 1910, 602) – here, Kafka is simultaneously courting to Felice, expressing his enthusiasm for Flaubert's linguistic genius, and returns to Buber's Chinese stories, praising them. This unintentionally serves as a great example for Kafka's famous bon mot, that no matter what he writes, it becomes literature.

In the remaining years, another significant intellectual encounter took place between them: two of Kafka's important texts, *Jackals and Arabs* and *A Report to an Academy*, were published in *Der Jude*, a journal founded by Buber. As a good friend, Max Brod recommended Kafka to Buber as a possible editor, but Kafka respectfully declined for his work-overload. A bit later, however, he sent these two texts to Buber, who was eager to receive them.⁸ Albeit this did not change the fact that in the subsequent, sporadic occasions Buber appeared in Kafka's letters and notes, he was always treated with the same, strange attitude.

The question remains: why was that?

We can hardly know for certain – the few subsequent fragments do not add much to what we already know. Academic literature on the subject usually proclaims that although Kafka was an avid follower of Jewish public life, Buber was, nevertheless, always found wanting in his eyes.⁹

This is possible.

But, to conclude with questions, isn't it possible that Kafka had problems with the sometimes overly didactic teachings of Buber, his direct testimony? Isn't this assumption supported by the fact that in the case of the aforementioned two texts Buber suggested using the parabolic subtitle of "Fable," while Kafka insisted on branding them "animal stories"? And to view all this from a reverse perspective: can a philosophy such as Buber's ever avoid being didactic? Isn't it only natural that Kafka, who burst out and wrote: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe,"¹⁰ and who wrote *Before the Law*, this ultimate account of the final encounter and the impossibility of testimony, does have an ambivalent attitude towards Buber, the man who proclaimed: at first, there was the encounter and "All real life is encounter." (Buber, 1970, 62)?¹¹

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⁸ or more on the cooperation between Kafka and Buber, see also Hanssen's study (2012), which gives a uniquely postcolonial and uchronic (a missed opportunity reemerging in studies on Kafka) account of Kafka.

⁹ A characteristic example of this comes from Hanssen: „[Kafka] was at the centre of Jewish intellectual life, Bohemian journalism, Yiddish theatre, and Zionist cinema. Prague was a hub of Jewish information and experimentation. But, generally, Kafka perceived the Zionist congresses as 'sorry affairs' and the lectures which he attended in 1915 by icons like Solokov, Ussishkin, and Ruppin as unbearably clamorous. Even the performances and texts by Buber, whom he liked on a personal level, were 'dreary' where 'something is missing'." Ibid. 193.

¹⁰ See the entry for 8 January 1914, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910-1923* (1988, p. 252).

¹¹ Translation is slightly revised.

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