

# A Doctor's Odyssey: Sickness and Health in Kafka's "Ein Landarzt"

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Of all the accusations made against the country doctor in Kafka's tale by the same name, none seems more harsh than the one the patient whispers as the doctor is laid next to him in bed: "[Du] kommst nicht auf eigenen Füßen."<sup>1</sup> While this observation would scarcely seem to compare with the usual charges made against the doctor—he has been accused, for example, of selfishness, passivity, and inconsiderateness<sup>2</sup>—it nonetheless is more condemning, because it is based on the simple fact that the doctor does not arrive at the sickbed by his own means. Rather, he is transported there by "unearthly horses" which materialize out of thin air; they at least appear unexpectedly on his property from a pigsty that he had not used in years. The gift of the horses enables the doctor to travel to his patient. But his trip no longer takes the form of a late-night house call once he grabs hold of the reins of the horses, which appear "durch die Kraft der Wendungen ihres Rumpfes" (DL 253), through a turn of their rumps which suggests a "Redewendung" or turn of phrase as well. Once the doctor latches on to these mythical horses, he is drawn into a mythical realm where he is forced to make a sacrifice in order to accomplish what he calls sardonically holy aims, "heilige Zwecke" (DL 259).

These holy aims might simply be the achievement of peace or rest. In a diary entry written in 1922, when Kafka's tuberculosis had advanced to a critical state, Kafka recalls the story "Ein Landarzt" which he completed in 1917.<sup>3</sup> In a somewhat paradoxical formulation he argues that rest cannot be neglected but must be attained through the mobilization of new forces which exceed the forces that one has available. He then cites the appearance of the horses in "Ein Landarzt" as one of those rare occasions where help was granted to one who had reached the limit of his resources: "Hier allerdings gibt es Überraschungen, das muß der trostloseste Mensch zugeben, es kann erfahrungsgemäß aus Nichts etwas kommen, aus dem verfallenen Schweinestall der Kutscher mit den Pferden kriechen" (T 892). Kafka's characterization of the horses as a stroke of good fortune would

seem to run counter to his tale—a tale in which the doctor is not only undressed and laid in bed with the sick but finally sentenced to perpetual wandering when his horses refuse to take him home or bring him back to his own bed. But his insistence that this gift alone is what enables the “most despondent of men” to rest calls into question what it is that the doctor is supposed to accomplish in this work.

His visit to his patient would at first seem to be in the service of “heilige Zwecke,” holy aims, since nothing is more holy than the aim of the medical profession: to cure the ill, to save them from death. To achieve that, however, the doctor must himself be in possession of health; that is, he must be able to travel to the sickbed on his own two feet to restore another to health. The doctor’s health is the condition for the realization of his aim, since his calling is what he incarnates each time he rescues another from death. He becomes what he calls in a scarcely veiled allusion to Christ “ein Weltverbesserer” (DL 256) each time he helps another escape the threat of death. In this tale, however, there is no “Weltverbesserer.” The doctor introduces the term only to explain, “Ich bin kein Weltverbesserer” (DL 256).

What ends the doctor then serves will be the focus of this paper. To whose sickbed is he called? And what, finally, can he do as one who must rely on figurative feet and metaphoric horses to travel to the ill and infirm? The doctor’s means of transport are by no means incidental in this work, since if the doctor is a figure for the writer, as so many critics have suggested, it is these very means (tropes, turns, and figures) that link them in their nighttime labors.

Three times in this short work, the doctor asks what it is that he does. The question first arises as he thinks of Rosa, his loyal servant, whom he left behind in the hands of a predatory horse groom: “Was tue ich, wie rette ich sie?” (DL 256); it comes up again as he establishes that his patient is healthy and his visit unnecessary: “Was tue ich hier in diesem endlosen Winter!” (DL 257); it arises one final time as the doctor is laid next to the patient in bed who, it ends up, is suffering from a fatal wound to the hip: “Was soll ich tun?” (DL 260). The question is striking given the doctor’s initial certainty that he has important business to do which cannot be delayed. Delayed, of course, it is, from his opening statement: “Ich war in großer Verlegenheit: eine dringende Reise stand mir bevor; ein Schwerkranker wartete auf mich in einem zehn Meilen entfernten Dorfe; . . . aber das Pferd fehlte, das Pferd” (DL 252). What detains the doctor, according to this statement, is the absence of a means to take him toward his end, a patient in a distant village. His horse, he tells us, died the night before “as a result of overexertion.” Without a second horse, he cannot travel to his patient; he is caught in a terrible dilemma.

This is at least the doctor’s predicament, as he understands it. He is prepared in every respect to travel, with the exception of a horse, a vehicle. Nonetheless, insofar as this one circumstance prevents him from answering the call he has received, it calls into question his ability to be a country doctor, the one name we have for him. As such a doctor, he is required to answer requests for help, al-

though on this occasion he cannot despite his best intentions. This occasion, consequently, represents both a starting and a stopping point, a point at which he may renew his title as doctor, and one at which he may lose it if he cannot attend to his patient tonight. Both possibilities are written into the doctor's posture; he stands, as he puts it, "reisefertig schon auf dem Hofe" (DL 252), ready to embark on a journey and finished with journeying, done with his work as a country doctor.

If the doctor is, as I suspect, finished with his work, it is because of an injury he sustains, one which is represented in this text through the death of his horse but which extends beyond this one circumstance. For a horse alone can be replaced; the doctor himself admits as much when he later claims, "wären es nicht zufällig Pferde, müßte ich mit Säuen fahren" (DL 257). What is irreplaceable is the mobility the doctor loses, the fitness to exercise his trade which is represented through the vehicle of his horse, but which finally has the doctor's health or well-being as its tenor. For this reason, the consequences of this loss are so grave for the doctor's person. If he cannot attend to his patient, if he cannot venture from his yard, he cannot be a country doctor. He is stripped of his *raison d'être*: "Immer mehr vom Schnee überhäuft, immer unbeweglicher werdend, stand ich zwecklos da" (DL 253).

The doctor's admission that he stands "zwecklos" in his own courtyard would at first glance seem to refer to the mere fact that he does nothing; he does not even help his servant Rosa find out if a neighbor might lend him a horse. But the admission refers to his peculiar standstill as well which prevents him from making the movement necessary to reaffirm his purpose or "Zweck." This movement is dialectical, requiring a means through which the doctor can return to the aims or ends ("Zwecke") defining him. These ends take the form of the doctor's calling or trade; he must attend to the patient who has called him to renew his calling as his own, as that which he embodies. From the outset, he stands deficient vis-à-vis this end, since only he has received this call; "[es] war nur für ihn bestimmt," as the gatekeeper in "Before the Law" might say (DL 269). This demand pertains only to him, for only he has elected for himself the task of curing the ill, of saving them from death. It is this purpose which in fact awakens him at night, calling him to a distant village to rescue someone. The doctor would not feel motivated—or mobilized—to answer this request if he did not already define himself as someone who serves this end. But in choosing this end as his exclusive measure, he also condemns himself to falling short of his determination in his immobility. Without a horse, without means, the doctor cannot reach the end he has set for himself as a human being. To this extent, then, he stands "zwecklos" in his courtyard. Once he can no longer move toward his end, what remains of him is what cannot be put to work, what serves no purpose.

Insofar as the doctor cannot leave his house he fails to live up to his determination. Although he is trapped in the proper—namely, his property—he cannot rise to the calling that supposedly defines him. Something hinders him in progressing toward the end that is not only his livelihood, but life itself. In one of the

few readings attentive to the religious dynamics in this work, Bluma Goldstein contends that the doctor must be a medium for a spiritual life to rescue others from sickness and death.<sup>4</sup> As a model for such a process, she points to the rabbis of Hasidic legend, in particular the Zaddikim who, because of their extreme piety, were endowed with the gift of performing miracles. Goldstein argues that several aspects of Kafka's story parallel the legends of the Zaddikim recorded in Alexander Eliasberg's *Sagen polnischer Juden*, a popular anthology of Hasidic folklore that Kafka is known to have possessed.<sup>5</sup> However compelling these examples may be, they are nonetheless of secondary importance in her reading. Her primary concern is to show that the Zaddik represents the ideal, against which the country doctor is measured. The Zaddik heals, she points out, in drawing out the divine sparks in the individual. These sparks stem from the act of creation, when the vessels containing divine light burst and were dispersed throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> The sparks nonetheless represent a unity: the unity of divine light or even divine substance. In releasing the sparks in others as well as in himself, the Zaddik brings forth a spiritual life that inheres in both and which transcends their mere physical existence.

The country doctor may, as Goldstein contends, fail to be a Zaddik, but only because he cannot be a Christ, who heals the ill and raises the dead in a manner surprisingly similar to her account of the Zaddik. Indeed, what Goldstein argues is the unequivocally Jewish strain in this work bears a striking resemblance to the figure of Christ, as Kafka understood it. In an earlier version of his now famous aphorism, "Der Messias wird erst kommen, wenn er nicht mehr nötig sein wird" (NgS 2. 56-7), Kafka addresses the Christian notion of the redeemer directly:

Der Messias wird kommen, bis der zügelloseste Individualismus des Glaubens möglich ist, niemand diese Möglichkeit vernichtet, niemand die Vernichtung duldet, also die Gräber sich öffnen. Das ist vielleicht auch die christliche Lehre, sowohl in der tatsächlichen Aufzeigung des Beispieles dem nachgefolgt werden soll, eines individualistischen Beispieles, als auch in der symbolischen Aufzeigung der Auferstehung des Mittlers im einzelnen Menschen. (NgS 2. 55)

The first sentence of this aphorism requires some explanation. Kafka uses the term "bis" in lieu of "wenn," as was apparently customary in Austro-Hungarian dialect; in one diary entry, he even notes that he was prone to confuse the two terms.<sup>7</sup> This aphorism, then, like the later one, is primarily concerned with the condition for the coming of the Messiah, the prerequisite for his advent. Christian doctrine, according to Kafka, illuminates this condition in two respects: First, it offers an example of someone who rose from the grave; and secondly it offers a symbol of the resurrection that can occur in each individual.

It is in this latter function that Christian doctrine bears on the healing process. Christ as "ein einzelner Mensch," a single human being, is subject to death. What enables him to transcend his finite existence is the "Mittler," the intermediary of a spiritual life resurrected in him. Although Christ is often identified as this intermediary, Kafka refrains from doing so here in order to distinguish between Christ the individual and Christ the supposed savior; in other words, he distin-

guishes between Christ as an example of someone who was saved and Christ as the symbol of the intermediary who can save every human being. As such a symbol, Christ is in fact compelled to save, for only in saving others does he simultaneously save himself; that is, he can demonstrate that he is a vehicle for a life victorious over death only if he repeatedly delivers others to this life, which is also the consummate state of health. For this reason, the priests who follow in his image are sometimes referred to as well as “doctors of the soul,” particularly in their pastoral mission. In administering the sacraments, they elevate the souls of their parishioners to a spiritual life which they incarnate, at least for the moment of the ritual.

“Ein Landarzt” invokes this model of healing on more than one occasion. The doctor even invites the comparison with priests when he complains that the people in his region are always asking the impossible of him. They demand that he heal them (“heilen”), which in German has the added connotation of redeeming or saving, as indicated by the number of words based on this root, including sacred (“heilig”), salvation (“Heil”), and savior (“Heiland”). They turn to the doctor, as he puts it, because they have “lost the old faith.” For this reason, the local priest sits at home unraveling his vestments, whereas he is summoned to the deathbed, as if to administer the last rites, which mark not only the end of life on earth, but also the beginning of an everlasting life in heaven. Several critics have argued that Kafka understood the task of the writer in a similar vein, in part because of one diary entry where he states that although work such as “Ein Landarzt” brings him occasional satisfaction, he will only find happiness if he can transform the world “ins Reine, Wahre, Unveränderliche” (T 838)<sup>8</sup>. But it is precisely this end which the doctor fails to attain, since he himself has been touched by sickness, or even death, inasmuch as he cannot rise to his own designation. In other words, he is wounded, perhaps in the rump or hip, because he cannot incarnate the calling that supposedly sustains him.

His one means of sustenance in his predicament is, in fact, his sickness, which reveals to him more than he knew he had in his house, the metonymy for his wounded body or infirm person. Confined to his courtyard, the doctor starts pacing around its perimeter and in a moment of distraction and frustration (“zerstreut, gequält” [DL 253]) kicks the door of a pigsty he had not used in years. To his astonishment, he discovers there both the smell of horses and an individual who offers to bring him to his patient: “Soll ich anspannen?” fragte er auf allen Vieren hervorkriechend” (DL 253). The offer is ambivalent, inasmuch as it is unclear who or what should be yoked up, either the still-invisible horses, suspected of being there only because of the smell, or the man who, crouched on all fours, could be said to be volunteering himself as a horse for the purposes of the trip; that is, a man whose “Bestimmung” or “Zweck” would be being a horse, a means toward an end. The doctor’s and Rosa’s response to this man would only underscore his degradation to the extent that they identify him as a thing found by chance on the property: “Man weiß nicht, was für Dinge man im eigenen Hause vorrätig hat,’ sagte es [das Dienstmädchen], und wir beide lachten” (DL 253).

Laugh the two may, for in the heart of the proper (das "eigene Haus") they discover what they had not known and what they cannot appropriate. Although these "things" are found on the doctor's property, they do not belong entirely to him; he does not recognize them as his own, as part of his own person. For this reason, perhaps, Kafka referred to the horses and horse groom in the story as the appearance of "something out of nothing," which suggests as well the appearance of what till now had been a lack, a deficit hindering the doctor's realization. This deficit, however, now becomes the doctor's means. It opens a space for him to figure what he would need to make the dialectical movement toward his own completion. All this in a figure.

Horses are by no means an unusual figure in Kafka's work. In "Wunsch, Indianer zu werden," Kafka's one-sentence meditation, a horse provides the running start for a flight that eventually exceeds it; what remains is simply the flight in the absence of any means.<sup>9</sup> In "Ein Landarzt," by contrast, the horses that are introduced do not disappear, since what makes them figurative is not the flight they launch, but their mere appearance as replacements:

"Hollah, Bruder, hollah, Schwester!" rief der Pferdekecht, und zwei Pferde, mächtige flankenstarke Tiere schoben sich hintereinander, die Beine eng am Leib, die wohlgeformten Köpfe wie Kamele senkend, nur durch die Kraft der Wendungen ihres Rumpfes aus dem Türloch, das sie restlos ausfüllten. Aber gleich standen sie aufrecht, hochbeinig, mit dicht ausdampfendem Körper. (DL 253–4)

The horses emerge through the door as if they were being born into the world; indeed, the way in which they enter the courtyard—head first, rear last, limbs packed close to the chest—all suggests birth.<sup>10</sup> This birth, however, has an element of the uncanny as well, since the horses that come to be rapidly outsize the pigsty in which they had been held; that is, they inflate in passing through the door into almost mythical creatures, creatures whose strength and size recall "homerische Gestalten" (T 842), the term Kafka coined to describe the horses he saw in the country in 1917. They acquire this stature, however, only by virtue of a series of "turns" which push them from inside to outside and set them in the world. These turns are not visible to the eye; indeed, the horses they eject through the door effectively conceal them. They are nonetheless the condition for the visibility of the animals, as they are first and foremost "Redewendungen." What the text describes as the repetitive turnings of the horses' buttocks are in fact the turns of phrase, which the text deploys at this very moment to create the means the doctor lacks. In other words, the text refers, "durch die Kraft der Wendungen," to the work it does, turning out phrases that turn nothing into something; in short, storytelling. What makes this coincidence significant—a coincidence in which the text speaks of what it does—is that it simultaneously catapults the story, which had reached an impasse in the doctor's stasis.<sup>11</sup> It brings or pulls the story from the doctor's yard to the bedside of his patient in a village ten miles off. This space, however, cannot be seen as a continuation of the former one, as what renders it accessible is a "Redewendung" that creates something out of nothing.

## THE ALLEGORY OF THE WOUND

The mobility that the doctor gains thus does not come without a cost. He himself names the price for his trip to his patient when he yells at the groom accompanying the horses: "Es fällt mir nicht ein, dir für die Fahrt das Mädchen als Kaufpreis hinzugeben" (DL 254). The exchange the doctor did not envision nonetheless occurs, insofar as he is whisked off to the sickbed; whereas Rosa, the girl in the above quote, is left behind with the horse groom, who intends to rape her. Marianne Schuller argues that this exchange is but the final one in a series, in which Rosa's body is "marked" and replaced by the signs signifying it.<sup>12</sup> The first of these exchanges occurs as the horse groom bites Rosa on the cheek, a location which is not entirely incidental given that the patient's wound will later be found in the right buttock or cheek: "[D]as willige Mädchen eilte, dem Knecht das Geschirr des Wagens zu reichen. Doch kaum war es bei ihm, umfaßt es der Knecht und schlägt sein Gesicht an ihres" (DL 254). The second occurs as he names the servant, who had till now been anonymous: "'Kutschieren werde aber ich, du kennst nicht den Weg,' sage ich. 'Gewiß,' sagt er, 'ich fahre gar nicht mit, ich bleibe bei Rosa'" (DL 254). These two incidents, biting and naming, first determine Rosa as a sexual being, the object of someone else's desire in Schuller's reading. Indeed, as she points out, the servant is in grammatical terms a gender-neutral being ("*das Mädchen*" or simply "es"), until the horse groom announces her name, which establishes her as female.<sup>13</sup> Rosa can be a sexual object, however, only insofar as she is absent in the flesh. Schuller's reading depends on this reversal, whereby the signs that signify the body simultaneously negate it, in order to claim that what propels the remainder of the story is a desire: the desire to fill the vacancy in the name "Rosa."

If this desire is indeed what drives the story, then the story's end is, as Schuller argues, certain. The doctor is taken to his patient and discovers in the patient's side a sign of the life he has forsaken to fulfill his mission as a doctor.<sup>14</sup> But the mere fact that this story continues, even after the patient's wound is found, indicates that the sacrifice the doctor makes is not merely physical, but metaphysical as well. The price he pays for his trip, in other words, is not only Rosa in her pure physical state prior to her representation in signs, but a life that cannot be embodied, as it is infinite and everlasting. The doctor forsakes this metaphysical life the moment he takes a seat in his carriage and grabs hold of the reins of horses that do not exist, which only figure what he lacks. As soon as he grabs hold of the reins, he is drawn into an "unearthly" realm; that is, into an allegorical drama, in which the life that he pursued as a doctor returns in its negation and perversion as an emblem.

This emblem is precisely the patient's wound. Although the doctor is initially convinced that his patient is healthy, he agrees to examine him again and this time discovers a fatal wound to the hip, which he describes in lurid detail:

In seiner rechten Seite, in der Huftengegend hat sich eine handtellergroße Wunde aufgetan. Rosa, in vielen Schattierungen, dunkel in der Tiefe, hellwerdend zu den

Rändern, zartkörnig, mit ungleichmäßig sich aufsammelndem Blut, offen wie ein Bergwerk obertags. So aus der Entfernung. In der Nähe zeigt sich noch eine Erschwerung. . . Würmer, an Stärke und Länge meinem kleinen Finger gleich, rosig aus eigenem und außerdem blutbespritzt, winden sich, im Innern der Wunde festgehalten, mit weißen Köpfchen, mit vielen Beinchen ans Licht. Armer Junge, dir ist nicht zu helfen. Ich habe deine große Wunde aufgefunden; an dieser Blume in deiner Seite gehst du zugrunde. (DL 258)

To the extent that Rosa is imprinted or emblazoned in this wound, she returns from the dead or at least from the site of her brutal rape at the hands of the horse groom. Her return, however, is simultaneously an act of revenge, insofar as she appears in the wound as a sign of the life that the doctor sacrifices for the sake of his profession. Although this life is undeniably Rosa's, it is the doctor's as well to the extent that it is the physical or sexual life he might have shared with Rosa, had he not devoted himself so exclusively to his work. The doctor at least intimates that such a life was a possibility in the same breath in which he acknowledges that this possibility no longer exists for him: "[D]ieses schöne Mädchen, das jahrelang, von mir kaum beachtet, in meinem Hause lebte – dieses Opfer ist zu groß" (DL 257). In lieu of this life, the doctor consistently chose death—" [I]ch [bin] schon in allen Krankenstuben, weit und breit, gewesen" (DL 260)—to affirm another life that he would embody as a healer or even savior. In this wound, however, he discovers that he cannot attain this end. He cannot be a medium for a spiritual life because he cannot cure this sickness unto death.

The wound he discovers in his patient's side thus simultaneously wounds or injures him. It reveals the limits of his power to transform the world "ins Reine, Wahre und Unveränderliche," to borrow Kafka's phrase again. This power to transform, however, is itself called into question by the very figurative nature of the wound, its status as an emblem. As emblem of another wound not accessible to sight, the wound is not affixed to the body of the patient or to that of the doctor. Rather it joins these two apparently separate persons in and under one sign: the sign "Rosa," which not only refers to the doctor's servant, but also to the flower. The rose is among other things a traditional symbol for the wound in Christ's heart; that is, a symbol of the wound Christ suffers as a man and that he overcomes as a Messiah.<sup>16</sup> Thus it brings together what would otherwise stand apart: life and death, sickness and health, patient and doctor.

Such is at least the significance of the rose as it pertains to Christ, himself a symbolic figure who unifies opposites (man and God). In this text, however, the rose cannot symbolically unify opposites, since there is no essential difference between the doctor and the patient. Or their difference is one in appearance only. Ostensibly, there is a patient suffering from a terrible wound and a doctor called to heal him. But to the extent the wound is incurable, it cripples them both; it reveals both as mortal. Both, in other words, are subject to this incurable disease, which has no proper expression in the world, no expression that is "pure, true and immutable." The one suitable expression for this illness, consequently, is an emblem which does not purport to be anything but a sign or, put otherwise, which



does not claim to embody anything. In the rose, the symbol of Christ's wound, the text finds such an emblem. It takes the symbol of the wound that Christ overcame and converts it into the emblem of a wound that no one can outlive.

No one can survive the wound, since no one is a Messiah. If the text consistently alludes to Christ, it is only to question his validity as a model for the healer ("Heiler") as well as for the savior ("Heiland"). Both the doctor and the patient are depicted in terms clearly borrowed from the representation of Christ. The patient's wound is, as I have noted, in his right side, like Christ's. Both wounds, moreover, are identified with flowers, if toward different ends, as I discussed above. But none of these examples would suffice as a critique of the model of healing epitomized in Christ if the text did not also invoke Christ's death on the cross. It does so in the scene immediately following the discovery of the wound. To appease the villagers, who expect him to perform miracles, the doctor agrees to let them use him for sacred ends: "[V]erbraucht ihr mich zu heiligen Zwecken, lasse ich auch das mit mir geschehen" (DL 259). What follows is a ritual resembling Christ's sacrifice. The doctor is undressed, before being laid in bed with the sick, as Christ was undressed before being crucified. He is then sung to by a chorus of schoolchildren, who taunt him to show his healing powers, as Christ was taunted on the cross to show that he was the Messiah: "Entkleidet ihn, dann wird er heilen, / Und heilt er nicht, so tötet ihn? / 'Sist nur ein Arzt, 'sist nur ein Arzt" (DL 259). However crude the song may be, it nonetheless reveals a fundamental premise of this text; namely, that the doctor must be a medium for a spiritual life if he is to rescue others from death. Only if he is such a medium, such an incarnation of everlasting life, can he also turn the "Wunde" into a "Wunder," which, I suspect, is one of the unwritten puns of this text.

Something else happens, though, as the doctor and the patient are laid next to one another in bed and left in an empty room, which recalls the tomb in which Christ was buried. The two separate figures blend into one, conjoined at the hip or in the wound, which extends to them both: "Zur Mauer, an die Seite der Wunde legen sie mich" (DL 259). Whose wound this line speaks of remains ambiguous, as the wound is treated independently of the body or person bearing it. It could be the patient's wound in his side; but it could just as well be the doctor's wound as a mortal man. Because this wound cannot be localized, it cannot be healed. The healing process depends on the appearance of an illness in its proper form, so that it can be eradicated for good. Christ essentially does so for those who believe in him. He eliminates the threat of death in dying and then rising from the grave. But in this wound, he, too, might reach the limit of his powers to heal, since this wound has no proper form, which determines what it is. The worms twisting in its interior attest to its constant change; that is, its ability to vary its appearance (shape, size, color, etc.) and even to appear as something else. No healer, consequently, can eliminate this wound, since nowhere is it present as itself, as that which it truly is. Whenever and wherever it appears, it appears as something else, which is not to say it is without consequence. This wound kills, precisely because it has no essence. It lives in sucking off life, in depleting a per-

son's resources. But as an exclusively negative phenomenon, which lives only in robbing life, the wound makes the sacrifice that defines the healing process utterly futile. One cannot suffer this wound and come out the other side. One cannot make it the means for one's own redemption, as it is nowhere embodied.

In the final paragraph of the story, the question is thus raised if there is in fact a patient, a boy who embodies this fatal sickness. After the alleged patient dies, the doctor prepares to leave the scene; a mob of angry patients suddenly appears out of nowhere and threatens to kill him. In his haste to escape them, he jumps half-naked into his carriage and orders his horses to leave. Although the horses first brought him to the house at lightning speed, this time they refuse to do more than amble aimlessly. The story ends with the doctor being driven around a wintry landscape without any hope of return to his home or to his bed. He cries out in the last line of the text: "Betrogen. Betrogen! Einmal dem Fehlläuten der Nachtglocke gefolgt—es ist niemals gutzumachen" (DL 261). The doctor cannot "make good" on the call he obeyed, since as a false alarm it deprives him of the patient he would need to draw a profit or a return. The reward of his trip would presumably be his return to himself as a doctor, who in the image of Christ delivers the ill from death. But in the absence of a patient the doctor no longer has any means to restore and redeem himself as a healer. What remains is simply his body, immobilized by death, or more precisely, his body immobilized *and* errant, because it cannot arrive at any end. The doctor never returns to the house that he in some respects never left, since, already on his deathbed, he cannot reach his "Zweck."

The doctor does nonetheless complete one thing in this tale, even if he fails on every other count. He tells the sick boy a story as he is laid next to him in bed:

Deine Wunde ist so übel nicht. Im spitzen Winkel mit zwei Hieben der Hacke geschaffen. Viele bieten ihre Seite an und hören kaum die Hacke im Forst, geschweige denn, daß sie ihnen näher kommt. (DL 260)

On the basis of this story the boy is able to surrender to his illness. He takes "das Ehrenwort eines Amtarztes mit hinüber" (DL 260), to a place outside the world. If the doctor can be said to accomplish something here, where all efforts at healing are in vain, it is to help this boy die through the power of his words. He figures death as a forester, the swinging of an axe in order to let this boy know that he has been touched by death. Death does not touch; it is neither an axe nor a scythe. These are figures, emblems, or turns of phrase invented to explain something which otherwise is not manifest. Because death has no proper form in which to appear, improper expressions, such as allegories and stories, are necessary to announce its onset and its work. The call that provides the pretext for this text is a figure for the arrival of death. The call or plea that the story directs to its reader is to let the doctor know who has come to visit him. It asks the reader to write a fable, just as the doctor did for his patient whose first words were, "Doktor, laß mich sterben" (DL 255).

What healing becomes in this respect is help to alleviate the pain of dying,

which for Kafka was neither a natural nor a finite process. Indeed, the doctor in this story is exposed to what Kafka called “die ewigen Qualen des Sterbens” (T 546), precisely because he does not know what has hit him, what saps his strength. In this state of seeming oblivion, he mistakes death for life, thereby intensifying and extending the torment of dying. For example, he mistakes two “unearthly” horses for earthly ones, and mistakes his own injuries for a wound in his patient’s side. These mistakes reveal the danger of storytelling, which can create something out of nothing and thus replace life with a simulation. At the same time, however, storytelling belongs to the healing and restoration process, for the wound it figures is the one that will be lifted when the Messiah comes. In the unfinished text that Kafka wrote for Isaak Löwy on the Yiddish theater, he explains the aim of his account in the following fashion: “Meine Absicht ist ganz einfach . . . den Vorhang zu heben und die Wunde zu zeigen. Nur nach Erkenntnis der Krankheit läßt sich ein Heilmittel finden und möglicherweise das wahre jüdische Theater schaffen” (NgS 1.430). In this text, I would say, Kafka does more than raise the curtain. He creates the forum in which the wound can be seen: an allegorical drama or, in his words, “[ein] wahres jüdisches Theater.”

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#### NOTES

1. Franz Kafka, “Ein Landarzt,” in *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann, in *Franz Kafka. Schriften Tagebücher Briefe. Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Jürgen Born et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1994), 260. All subsequent references to Kafka’s work are to the critical edition, unless otherwise indicated. The following abbreviations will be used to indicate the volumes of the edition: DL for *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*; T for *Tagebücher*, eds. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller and Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990); NgS for *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente*, 2 vols., ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1993). Volume and page number for all citations will be listed in the text

2. See, for example, Walter Sokel’s analysis of the doctor’s character in Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka – Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst* (Munich: Albert Langen Georg Müller Verlag, 1964), 270–81.

3. According to the critical edition, “Ein Landarzt” was written sometime between December 1916 and January 1917. See *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, Vol. 2 (Apparatband), 286–32.

4. Bluma Goldstein, “Franz Kafka’s ‘Ein Landarzt’: A Study in Failure,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 42 (1968), 745–59.

5. Alexander Eliasberg, *Sagen polnischer Juden* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1916). It is unclear whether Kafka would have been familiar with this anthology at the time he was working on “Ein Landarzt,” given that the anthology was published in 1916, the same year that Kafka presumably wrote the story. Even if he had not yet read this volume, he would have been familiar with the legends of the Zaddikim through the writings of Martin Buber and Micha Josef bin Gorion as well as numerous others. Hartmut Binder confirms that Kafka owned a copy of Eliasberg’s anthology. See H. Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch in zwei Bänden*, Vol. 1: *Der Mensch und seine Zeit* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1979), 472.

6. For reasons of brevity, I have had to abbreviate Goldstein’s far more nuanced account of the Kabbalistic creation myth adopted by the Hasidim. See Goldstein, 746–49. For a more detailed account of the notion of God’s contraction (Zimzum) and the breaking of the vessels (Shehirath ha-Kelim) see Gershon Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1957), 285–314.

7. The diary entry is from 24 January 1915. Kafka mentions that Felice Bauer corrected him for ordering a waiter, “Bringen Sie die Zeitung, bis sie ausgelesen ist” (T 722).

8. Sokel, *Tragik und Ironie*, 261; Kurt J. Fickert, "Fatal Knowledge: Kafka's 'Ein Landarzt,'" in *Monatshefte* 66 (1974), 385–6.

9. The text of this meditation reads: "Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, bis man die Zügel wegwarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glatt gemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf" (DL 32–3).

10. Frank Möbus argues likewise that the horses' appearance resembles a birth. See Möbus, *Sünden-Falle: Die Geschlechtlichkeit in Erzählungen Franz Kafkas* (Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 1994), 130.

11. Marianne Schuller underscores the ways in which the text performs its own narration. Her reading first drew my attention to the forces at work in the text that bring the story from its initial stasis to its rapid movement in the second half. In her view, desire is what rips the narrative from its initial stasis. While I agree with her reading for the most part, I would place the impulse for the sudden shift in the narration elsewhere, as I discuss in the section that follows. See M. Schuller, "Wunde und Körperbild: Zur Behandlung des Wunden Motivs bei Goethe und Kafka," in *BildKörper. Verwandlungen des Menschen zwischen Medium und Medizin* (Hamburg: Lit, 1998), 35–8.

12. Schuller, 38

13. Schuller, 38; Möbus, *Sünden-Falle*, 131.

14. In recent years, "Ein Landarzt" has been interpreted almost exclusively as an allegory of desire. Josef Vogl argues, like Marianne Schuller, that the exchange of Rosa for two horses involves the replacement of Rosa with signs in J. Vogl, *Ort der Gewalt. Kafkas literarische Ethik* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 1990), 124–6. Henry Sussman likewise claims that the wound is a mark or sign of the doctor's desire in H. Sussman, "The Text that Never was a Story: Symmetry and Disaster in 'A Country Doctor,'" in *Approaches to Teaching Kafka's Short Fiction*, ed. Richard T. Gray (New York: Modern Language Assoc. of America, 1995), 123–34. My objection concerning this reading is that it takes only one aspect of this story into account. The doctor's desire is at least two-fold in this work: for Rosa and for his calling as doctor, for flesh as well as spirit.

15. Claudine Raboin remarks that Kafka interpreted his sickness as the "revenge of the un-lived life," in C. Raboin, "'Ein Landarzt' und die Erzählungen aus den Blauen Oktavheften 1916-1918," in *Text + Kritik*, VII (1994), 150. Raboin's observation seems particularly apt in the connection with the wound in "Ein Landarzt" whose autobiographical dimensions are unmistakable. The two poles that the doctor is caught between (Rosa and his patient) reflect Kafka's constant torment between marriage and writing, family and a solitary existence. Kafka believed that in the wound in this story he predicted his own tuberculosis, as indicated in a letter to Max Brod from September 1917, "Auch habe ich es selbst vorausgesagt. Erinnerst Du Dich an die Blutwunde im 'Landarzt'." See Max Brod/Franz Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft*, Vol. II *Briefwechsel*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1959), 160. Of greater relevance to the current reading was Kafka's description of the wound in his lung as an emblem, bearing the name Felice for his twice-finacée Felice Bauer, whom he could not marry: "Ist die Lungenwunde nur ein Sinnbild, wie Du behauptest, Sinnbild der Wunde, deren Entzündung Felice und deren Tiefe Rechtfertigung heißt, ist dies so, dann sind auch die ärztlichen Ratschläge (Licht Luft Sonne Ruhe) Sinnbild. Fasse dieses Sinnbild an" (T 831).

16. For reasons of brevity, I have had to limit my discussion of the symbolic significance of the rose to this one aspect. It is worth noting, however, that the rose is also associated with the Virgin Mary, in particular with her love for her son. For a fuller account of the iconographic significance of the rose, see Wilhelm Molsdorf, *Christliche Symbolik der mittelalterlichen Kunst* (Leipzig: Verlag Karl. W. Hiersemann, 1926), 142–3 and Gerhart B. Ladner, *Handbuch der frühchristlichen Symbolik. Gott Kosmos Mensch* (Stuttgart/Zurich: Belser Verlag, 1992), 138–44. Bluma Goldstein notes that Angelus Silesius refers to Christ's wound as a rose in a poem whose refrain is, "Laß meine Seel ein Bienlein / Auff demen Rosen-Wunden seyn," in Goldstein, "Franz Kafka's 'Ein Landarzt,'" 755–6. One possible biblical precedent for the symbol of the rose is *Ecclesiasticus* 24 13–14: "There I grew like a cedar of Lebanon, like a cypress on the slopes of Hermon, like a date palm at Enged, like roses at Jericho." The rose of Jericho is also called the Resurrection Rose (in German "die Auferstehungsrose") because the flower is normally curled in a tight ball, except when wet, when its petals open in the shape of a Greek cross. The opening of the wound in this text, it seems to me, resembles the opening of the Resurrection Rose when placed in water. What is at stake in this text, however, is whether resurrection is possible.