

Franz Kafka, or on writing after Terpsichore¹

Francesco Garbelli

Abstract. In this paper, I will contend that Franz Kafka's use of language primarily follows a choral model. This stylistic choice matters in the context of Kafkian struggle to accomplish the purest expression of being in written form: since Kafka believes that language is bound to produce a false and unsuccessful representation of reality if it rests on defined grammatical uses, he borrows from choral dance a compositional model in order to implement an anti-grammatical fashion to write in, as the only option to make language enact truth. I will claim that a theoretical reconstruction of this model, and a discussion of the semiotic counterparts of its elements, also matters in the context of translation of Kafka's work. Translating Kafka properly would thus mean to convey the salient traits of his use of German to cope with the choral model, i.e. prosody, figural clusters, and harmony, and the overall tone of sublimity and comedy. Then, it would result in a prudent exercise of the target language, with special attention to its intersemiotic trasmutative relationship to choral gestures.

1. Balancing a written truth

I reserve the pages that follow to many interdisciplinary considerations on Franz Kafka and intersemiotic translation. In doing this, I combine different discursive and theoretical regimes, like philosophy, semiotics, literary criticism and deconstructionism, in order to build an epistemology that suits Kafka's art; hence, I use this ad hoc construal to pose and explore the issue of intersemiotic translation. This is the reason why I refer to my analysis as semi-philosophical, for it is only partially philosophical, and semio-philosophical, for it assumes semiotic conceptual paraphernalia as privileged theoretical tools.

Among Kafka's life-long concerns, the main one presumably was the problem of how to express the truth of reality by the means of literature, i.e. by the art of writing, in order to "raise the world into the pure, true, immutable" (Kafka 2022). That issue wasn't merely esthetical to him: it was the consequence of a serious metaphysical stance towards being and experience. Indeed, Kafka claimed that any representation whatsoever is doomed to be false, since it has as a necessary condition of existence its separation from what it is intended to represent: only the whole is the truth, which ceases to be one and true as soon as a part – a subject, an interpretant, an individual mind etc. – detaches from or even folds upon it as to set a reflection into motion, thus imposing a restricted and unsatisfying perspective to the experience it enacts². But men, he thought, are both misguided with reflection and lost without it: misguided, for reflection lies and therefore is evil, broadcasting despair every time it shows that reality is

¹ The present article retrieves and furthers a reflection concerning Franz Kafka that I began outlining in a previous one, that I take the liberty to mention (Garbelli 2024).

² "Truth is indivisible, hence it cannot recognize itself; whoever wants to recognize it must be a lie" (Kafka 2002b). From this follows that: "How big life's sphere is can be observed from the fact that, on the one hand, mankind, as far back as it can remember, overflows with speech, and on the other hand, speech is only possible wherever one intends to lie. // Confession and lie are the same. As one confesses, one lies. One cannot express that which one is, for that is what one is; one can communicate only that which one is not, that is, a lie" (Kafka 2002a, p. 348, my translation. Original text: "Wie groß der Kreis des Lebens ist kann man daraus erkennen, daß einerseits die Menschheit soweit sie zurückdenken kann von Reden überfließt und daß andererseits Reden nur dort möglich ist, wo man lügen will. // Geständnis und Lüge ist das Gleiche. Um gestehen zu können, lügt man. Das was man ist kann man nicht ausdrücken, denn dieses ist man eben; mitteilen kann man nur das was man nicht ist, also die Lüge").

unachievable by it; lost, for life commands to every living being to reject despair and live on, which can be performed only by furthering reflection upon possible ways of building representations to be used to that end³. That is why literature is so important to Kafka: it is a struggle for salvation, because only a sufficiently adequate expression can redeem the ever wretched particular gaze upon the world. Therefore, writing must rely on a critical, responsible, and committed inquiry about its expressive avenues.

Kafka elaborated his own solution starting from the acknowledgement that representational limits stand out especially when the mediated experience feels awkward, abject to senses and absurd to mind⁴. The point to him was precisely to force representations in that very direction: in fact, “the true way leads along a tight-rope, which is not stretched aloft but just above the ground. It seems designed more to trip one than to be walked along” (Kafka 2002b), and an appropriate writing is one that arranges language so that it scandalizes (in the ancient, biblical meaning of making one falter) the reader – and the writer himself. Such a new experience is like an orthogonal outlook with respect to the old one: whereas the latter showed a fracture, the former, thanks to its extraneity to a clear-cut, grammatically fixed representational scope on reality, rotates the shot, suspends distinctions and displays a continuity. Lies will be lies, evil will be evil, but they will nonetheless serve the truth and the good.

As Kafka never collected nor openly exposed such positions in a full-developed theory, they can only be inferred from a comparison between his stray notes and reported conversations, like those with Max Brod or Gustav Janouch, and the stylistic and thematic construal of Kafkian novels and short stories. Nonetheless, a fragment from 1906, allegedly written as a draft of a reply to Brod’s aesthetic idea that the category of beauty should be replaced by that of novelty⁵, presents a unitary yet fledgling program. In section c) Kafka refutes Brod’s theory by stating that aesthetic experience includes the general physiological fact of fatigue, which does not entail any loss of aesthetic value and suitability, so

it would be wrong to say that there is this double relationship to art [presence or absence of novelty]. It is better to say: the object hovers over the aesthetic edge and fatigue (which actually only exists in relation to the inclination of the immediately preceding time); in other words: the object has lost its balance, and in a negative sense. And yet, your [Brod’s] conclusion pushes towards arranging this contradiction, for apperception is not a state but a movement, so it must be completed (Kafka 1993, p. 10, my translation)⁶.

There’s no need to settle what proves to be a contradiction only from the point of view of logic and the overall characteristics of ordinary discourses and representations, like Brod does: as a result, the balance between aesthetic edge and fatigue would be lacking in favor of just one of the two poles of the relationship, whilst true objects show themselves by hovering in-between them. Furthermore, novelty would not even be novelty at all, since what would count as new would be established at the flawed representational level: novelty would be packaged by means of pre-existing standard and would result in a hoax. Instead of dealing with two defined alternatives, one should focus on a balance effacing their contours. Recall that Kafkian use of language is aimed at making one stumble so that her gaze becomes

³ Kafka imagined the following conversation: “It cannot be said that we are lacking in faith. Even the mere fact of our life is of a faith-value that cannot be exhausted’. ‘Where is the faith-value here? One simply cannot not-live’. ‘It is precisely in this ‘simply cannot’ that the insane strength of faith lies; in the form of this denial it takes shape” (Kafka 2002b). That is probably why he said to his friend and future biographer Max Brod: “Thinking things over is the advice of the serpent. But it is also good and human. Without it one is lost” (Brod 1960, p. 165); indeed “Evil is sometimes in one’s hand like a tool” (Kafka 2002b).

⁴ As Mauro Nervi pinpoints, abjection and absurdity are not qualities of Kafkian reality in itself, but effects on human sensibility and understanding springing from the interaction between men’s logic and the alien, incompatible logic of life (Nervi 2023, pp. X-XI).

⁵ For a better contextualization, see Skolnik (2017).

⁶ Original text: “Aber wäre es unrecht zu sagen, daß es dieses doppelte Verhältnis zur Kunst gebe. Lieber also: der Gegenstand schwebt über der ästhetischen Kante und Müdigkeit (die es eigentlich nur zur Liebhaberei der knapp vorhergehenden Zeit gibt), also: der Gegenstand hat das Gleichgewicht verloren und zwar im üblen Sinn. Und doch drängt deine Folgerung zum Arrangieren dieses Gegensatzes, denn Apperception ist kein Zustand, sondern eine Bewegung, also muß sie sich vollenden”.

orthogonal: by switching perspective, one could say that what appears is now a dipole binding together the extremes. Groupe μ has notably stated that any real new act of semiotization starts from a dipole (Groupe μ 2015), but didn't say much about how such an auroral state is supposed to be manifested and exploited in order to produce satisfying representations of reality, in particular the literary ones. Kafka offers an explanation.

On the lookout for a balance expressing the dipole Kafka navigates however the domain of dynamicity – consistent with a notion of apperception as a movement – which is different from the domain of stillness proper of coded oppositional systems of signs. Balance in this dimension is the one sought for by the banishing of station and the subsequent set into motion of representations. Balance as a whole, indeed, resulting from faltering and changing patterns, angles, rhythms in the making, so that novelty and fatigue take turns: a sort of harmony. In other words, the equilibrium that Kafka wants to preserve is the condition for the object to move freely and continuously, and not an immobilizing frame.

To convey the object properly, art is thus called to find a balance in motion. The same, obviously, goes for literature. As the representations it employs are linguistic, literary truth can be achieved by writing in a different way from that which is prescribed by grammar, namely in an anti-grammatical way. In fact, grammar is a stable set of rules governing any production of signs in a given language, imposing its arbitrary segmentation upon reality; anti-grammar breaks through it, creating a real dipole of novelty and fatigue, since it is a deviance from mainstream representational schemas however allowing a habituation to its way of dealing with the matter to be expressed. Anti-grammar isn't pure chaos: it consists of an emerging regularity in the process of re-semiotizing the object better than grammatical dictate. Language's molds are to be bent and deformed in order to see through them; more specifically, semantic and syntactic expectations are to be put forth just to be disregarded right after, but in a way to maintain a link between the different phases of the prose, as well as to let a transversal order appear in the layout. Valentino Baldi has thus commented that “Kafkian narrative revolution lies in the violation of two basic rhetorical norms: the first, which demands that the semantic sets involved in the figurative process always be distinguished, allowing the reader to understand the nature of the operation; the second, which involves the distinction between metaseemes and metalogisms” (Baldi 2019, p. 99, my translation)⁷. This can be put in resonance with *L'Anti-Edipe*: “an author is great because he cannot prevent himself from tracing flows and causing them to circulate, flows that split asunder the catholic and despotic signifier of his work, and that necessarily nourish a revolutionary machine on the horizon. That is what style is, or rather the absence of style – asyntactic, agrammatical” (Deleuze, Guattari 1983, p. 133). By using an anti-grammatical writing, distinctions recede and a complex dipolar reality shows itself.

2. A model to translate

On the occasion of Kafka's death centennial, prestigious Italian editorial series “I Meridiani Mondadori” has announced a new edition of Kafkian complete work; to the purpose, Italian Germanist Luca Crescenzi, together with a team of Kafkian scholars and translators, will be providing new Italian translations and commentaries of the various texts composing it. As an anticipation of the project, the publisher licensed in 2024 the new edition of *Ein Landarzt (A Country Doctor)*, translated in Italian as *Un medico di campagna*. It contains many remarks by Crescenzi; interestingly, he affirms that

Almost all new translations and editions of individual works or collections of Kafka's narratives that have appeared in Italy have not undermined the notion that they are characterized by rigorous hermeticism. These editions have emphasized the necessity of offering the most scrupulous and up-to-date version of Kafka's texts to facilitate a different and easier understanding, which, however, is expected to become clearer in the future. Thus, the illusion has taken hold in publishing that a

⁷ Original text: “La rivoluzione narrativa kafkiana sta nell'infrazione di due norme retoriche basilari: la prima, che impone di distinguere sempre gli insiemi semantici coinvolti nel processo figurale, in modo da consentire al lettore di comprendere la natura dell'operazione; la seconda, che consiste nella distinzione tra metaseemi e metalogismi”.

completely new Kafka can be offered to the reader, based on more accurate philological choices, more precise translations, or supposedly “unpublished” materials. In reality, no “new” Kafka can take shape in this way. [...] Not only are all of Kafka’s texts well known, but the manuscripts and typescripts of most of them have also been digitally reproduced [...]. For years now, Italian editions of Kafka’s works, whether explicitly or not, have utilized all the tools made available by the critical editions published in Germany. Therefore, textual philology cannot shed any more light than it has already shed (Crescenzi 2024, pp. XLI-XLII, my translation)⁸.

Translating Kafka (in Italian as well as in any other language) is challenging for no new hints nor aid are expected from philology. This does not mean that to try to set up a new translation of his work is a hopeless cause. Rather, it means that a different kind of argument is needed in order to support and guide the reflection about how to translate Kafkian prose anew. In the following pages, I will be contending that a discussion about Kafkian model to compose in an anti-grammatical way may help out.

Let’s start by inquiring what kind of regularities emerge from anti-grammar and whether they can be articulated into a model. At a closer look, there’s only one passage among all Kafkian meditations about expressing truth that is positive with respect to the possibility of the attempt. We read it in *Nachgelassene Schriften II*: “It is maybe only in the chorus that a truth might be found” (Kafka 2002a, p. 348, my translation)⁹. That Kafka held this belief very thoroughly can be indirectly corroborated by the fact that many compositional choices in his work reveal themselves as its putting into practice. To wit, it is possible to go through his novels and short stories to unfailingly find out that every time an epiphanic scene – a scene in which something ordinary, according to Kafka’s aesthetics¹⁰, is registered and revealed as a miracle – is to unfold, a collective is involved, either as a character on stage or as the voice styling the writing.

Examples of the first case, in which plurality is explicitly thematized as a content, are the musician dogs accompanying the protagonist’s awakening to true knowledge in *Forschungen eines Hundes* (*Investigations of a Dog*), the groups of employees to the Hotel Occidental showing the alienation and automation of western life and applicants and staff of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma revealing the American dream of salvation for every single soul in *Der Verschollene* (*The Man Who Disappeared*) and the people living or working for the court in the same building, displaying the continuity between existence and law, in *Der Prozeß* (*The Trial*). In the second case, plurality is a trait of writing itself. Actually, this latter case is always the case in Kafkian prose, at least if we give credence to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s renowned interpretation of Kafka’s work as an *agencement collectif d’énonciation* (Deleuze and Guattari 1975), which allows us to better clarify the relationship between the first and the second case: for this one would be a mode of construal based on a principle always at work in background, seldomly appearing as that other one in many outspoken figures throughout Kafkian narrative. In an *agencement collectif d’énonciation*, different codes, uses, orders of discourse, semantic patterns, and syntactic planes intertwine and interfere yet developing a kind of global identity: it is easy indeed to find here a necessary condition of anti-grammar, as enunciates composed this way must deploy at least the duality proper of the dipole, which is the core and starting point of any further formal plurality. In fact, we have seen that anti-grammar is

⁸ Original text: “Quasi tutte le nuove traduzioni e edizioni di singole opere o complessi di narrazioni kafkiane apparse in Italia non hanno scalfito l’idea che esse siano caratterizzate da un rigoroso ermetismo e hanno insistito sulla necessità di offrire la più scrupolosa e aggiornata versione dei testi kafkiani per favorirne una diversa e più agevole comprensione, destinata però a precisarsi in futuro. Si è così fatta strada nell’editoria l’illusione di poter offrire al lettore un Kafka tutto nuovo perché basato su scelte filologiche più accurate, su traduzioni più precise o su presunti materiali “inediti”. In realtà nessun “nuovo” Kafka può prender forma in questo modo. [...] I testi kafkiani non solo sono tutti noti, ma di essi sono anche in gran parte riprodotti digitalmente i manoscritti e dattiloscritti [...]. Da anni, ormai, le edizioni italiane delle opere kafkiane, dichiaratamente o no, fanno uso di tutti gli strumenti messi a disposizione dalle edizioni critiche apparse in Germania. La filologia testuale non può dunque illuminare più di quanto abbia già illuminato”.

⁹ Original text: “Erst im Chor mag eine gewisse Wahrheit liegen”.

¹⁰ As Kafka explained to Gustav Janouch: “Edschmid speaks of me as if I were an engineer. Whereas I am only a very mediocre, clumsy draughtsman. He claims that I introduce miracles into ordinary events. That is, of course, a serious error on his part. The ordinary is itself a miracle! All I do is to record it” (Janouch 1953, pp. 44-45).

functional to make representations clash in order to push them to the limit of absurd and express the truth within them from an orthogonal perspective – plurality is inscribed into its practice.

There is also a hybrid level between the first and the second case of plurality in Kafkaian prose, which manifests, in a quasi-metaliterary fashion, the diagram of transformation from the one to the other and reverse (since, as previously observed, they precisely have a transformative relationship): it occurs wherever an intra-diegetic narrative is inserted into the ongoing one. By using as overt, active elements of the diegesis tales, legends, parables, reports and alike, Kafka is able to tackle literature, and narration in particular, as the medium through which collective enunciation and enunciate meet; from the early clownish literary attempt of *Gespräch mit dem Beter* (*Conversation with the Supplicant*), in *Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (*Description of a Struggle*), in which narration proceeds according to a *mise en abyme* of stories, each one told by some character who has just been narrated in the preceding one – thus provoking a rhythmic interplay of *embrayage* and *débrayage* – to the mature works in which, like the tale of the man before the Law in *Der Prozeß* or the full set of books of ancestors, parables about the emperor, rumors and legends regarding The Great Wall and news concerning the status of the empire in *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* (*The Great Wall of China*), intradiegetic narratives are functionally articulated with specific roles in the structure of the overall narration, Kafka demonstrates a strong interest in embedding stories, for stories are coalescences of a plural web of factors – a language, a culture, a physical affordance, the entire chain of storage, reception and renegotiation of both the plane of expression and the plane of content – that contribute to truth making once they altogether converge, so that bringing stories in the foreground is a way of presenting them as what is literature’s goal to produce, with which features, and how¹¹. Narration is an oeuvre of all and appanage of all, bringing forth the plural aspect of the reality it represents.

Here we face two further consequences. First, as narrative is a transforming tool, writing does not strictly speaking represent anything at all: it simply makes it appear in a different yet true metamorphosis. To wit, there’s no iconicity nor a point-to-point correspondence between the level at which enunciation and what is being enunciated are fused in the totality of life, and the level at which literary representations express the balance allowing a right deliverance of the object¹². The manifold is an atmosphere, a force initially pulsing into the dipole, a mode of being, that writing shapes in its own terms (these having to be anti-grammatical in order to shape it properly). Second, to perform an *agencement collectif d’ennonciation*, narrative has to follow a model that is not literary, for literature indeed explains and justifies itself, but only after all is said and done, by retrospectively projecting its representations on the object – moreover, one cannot undress the object once it has been linguistically packaged: yet at the beginning, there is no criterion immanent to language to rely on to fulfill its task, since the original movement takes place on a divided level. Orthogonality, the suppression of the divide between levels, is precisely achieved by anti-grammar, i.e. a violation of the essence of language: to borrow a distinction proposed by Giovanni Matteucci (2021), it distorts into an “experience-with” the effect of an instrument which is designed to produce an “experience-of”. One need something belonging to an extra domain in order to get inspired to break through grammatical canons, as they come to be inadequate to keep up with it; something that, to be translated in written form, cannot but alter the rules of the target medium and impose its own, worth the loss of sense at all.

So what is the domain of the model that literature is to emulate for Kafka? We have seen that the equilibrium such a model whatsoever has to exhibit is a dynamic one. To be exact, it is the balance of a plurality in motion; in other words, the model refers to a manifold in dynamic harmony. Now, Pietro Citati (1987) claimed that according to Kafka this model pertains to the domain of hearing (thus the term “harmony” would prove to fit really well), as opposed to the domain of sight. Admittedly, here and

¹¹ This idea can be compared to the reflection developed by Raban in *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande* (*Wedding Preparations in the Country*): “‘Well’, he thought, ‘if I could tell her the whole story, she would cease to be astonished. One works so feverishly at the office that afterwards one is too tired even to enjoy one’s holidays properly. But even all that work does not give one a claim to be treated lovingly by everyone; on the contrary, one is alone, a total stranger and only an object of curiosity. And so long as you say ‘one’ instead of ‘I,’ there’s nothing in it and one can easily tell the story; but as soon as you admit to yourself that it is you yourself, you feel as though transfixed and are horrified” (Kafka 1989).

¹² “Le langage cesse d’être représentatif pour tendre vers ses extrêmes o uses limites” (Deleuze, Guattari 1975, p. 42).

there in Kafkaian oeuvre it is possible to spot such an opposition, which mirrors the contrast between stillness and fixation of distinctions in grammar and their mobility and porousness in anti-grammar: for a Kafka's frequent literary gimmick consists in materializing absurdity as something object to see, and by accompanying its presence on the scene with some kind of sound, which is supposed to ravish the characters and the reader beyond the limits of sense and senses. Hence, while sight promotes a repulsion, hearing cherishes an attraction: in *Die Verwandlung* (*The Metamorphosis*), Gregor Samsa reaches the apex of his degradation while following the fiddle played by his sister; in *The Trial*, Joseph K. is disgusted by the confusion and the deprivation of the court's offices as he browses around, but people shouting and chatting sound like a big laugh to him, and a gramophone starts playing; an analogue gramophone is playing when the monkey of *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (*A Report to an Academy*) succeeds in the absurd task of looking like a human. However, Citati does not extend the alleged opposition to the whole of Kafkaian production, but states that it is manifested albeit in the author's later works, the main evidence being *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*). Here, whenever the land surveyor K. tries to penetrate the mystery of the castle and the dignitaries personifying it, which are figures of the enigma of men's interaction with reality, by looking at them, he inevitably gets frustrated: the castle appears as a bunch of random houses, the portrait that K. presumes to depict the Count represents instead the concierge, rumors about official Klammer's appearance are discordant and when K. peeps at him, he's such an everyman that K. doubts his vision right after. On the other hand, the castle makes contact with the ears: at the telephone of the inn, in schoolchildren's clamor, through the noise made by the officials at the *Herrenhof*, within the crashes of Sordini's piles of documents, in the ring of the castle's bell. Sight is puzzled, leading to a dead end, whereas hearing shows the orthogonal path to experience the castle as a commonality with which every part is in continuity, for it puts incompatible representations in a dynamic order building a superior unity. Which is consistent with the hypothesis that a plurality in motion is what paves the way of truth. However, Citati's acoustic model is valid only in a figurative sense, just like abjection is a way to materialize absurdity. Kafka yields many clues about it. Firstly, in the very scene of *The Castle* in which K. talks on the phone, it is stated that "a humming, such as K. had never before heard on the telephone, emerged from the receiver. It was as if the murmur of countless childish voices – not that it was really a murmur, it was more like the singing of voices, very very far away – as if that sound were forming, unlikely as that might be, into a single high, strong voice, striking the ear as if trying to penetrate further than into the mere human sense of hearing" (Kafka 2009, p. 21). The sound of the castle is of a genre never listened to before, and overcomes the mere hearing.

Secondly, in *Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse* (*Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse-People*), the narrator presents Josephine as an unrivalled singer, but soon he asks himself if what she does is singing at all, and not piping in a rather ordinary extent, just to conclude that what makes Josephine so special is that she offers to the Mouse Folk the occasion to assemble and, forgetting about her singing whatsoever, to collectively fantasize, so that "the real multitude, it is clear to see, has withdrawn into itself. Here [...] the people dream; it is as if the limbs of each individual relaxed, as if the restless might for once stretch out at his pleasure in the great warm bed of the people" (Kafka 2012); which is even odder if one takes into account that "to understand her art you need not just to hear her, but also to see her" (*ivi*) and that her performances are shrouded in silence ("how will our assemblies be possible, held in total silence? Weren't they silent, though, even with Josefine?" [*ivi*]). So again we discover a plurality in motion, but participation in it involves sight and silence, beyond hearing itself.

Another occurrence of a visual and silent music is contained in *Investigations of a Dog*, which is – thirdly – the most important evidence in this regard. The hunter hound, the canine God that the protagonist encounters at the end of his research and by whom the truth he's looking after is temporarily disclosed to him, does so by the means of a supernatural chant, which is actually "observed from indefinable details" (Kafka 2002b) and probably mute, of better confused with his words vanishing into the void. But what is most remarkable is the episode of the seven musician dogs who first put the protagonist on the track of truth:

They did not speak, they did not sing, for the most part they kept almost stubbornly silent, but from the empty air they conjured music. All was music. The way they lifted and set down their feet, certain turns of the head, their running and their standing still, the positions they took up in relation to one



another, the dance-like patterns they formed, as when one of them supported his front paws on another's back and they then arranged themselves so that the first dog, standing upright, took the weight of all the rest, or when they described complicated figures by slithering in and out with their bodies close to the ground, and always faultlessly; not even the last dog made a mistake, though he was a little unsure, not always finding his link with the others right away, hesitating sometimes as it were at the first note of the tune, but he was only unsure by comparison with the magnificent sureness of the others, and he could have been far more unsure, infinitely unsure, without spoiling anything, since the others – these great masters – kept such imperturbable time (*ivi*).

The musician dogs perform, conjure a visual music without singing at all – later the protagonist will reflect that “the most striking thing about those dogs, I found their music less significant than their taciturn nature” (*ivi*). They create a kind of polyphony from the emptiness: they are not just exhibiting reality, they are enacting it. Remember that the model of Kafkian writing is one that provides non-representational signs – signs that do not bear any resemblance to the object, but manipulate the conditions at which it is exerted and developed – whose action is inscribed in the continuity of life and brings it forth. The acoustic model surely is a good candidate to illustrate this phenomenon, for sound depends on the harmony created by the attunement of the parts. But it cannot be but a metaphor, because the same principle is at work in silence, as visual harmony (and in other senses as well) – therefore, a model encompassing the opposition to the domain of sight is required. And such a model, of a manifold in dynamic balance, corresponds to the performance of the musician dogs, in which all senses mingle in a perfect choreography, their balance having become a purely, essential energetic fact. Kafka's chorus is not a singing group – it is the chorus of a Greek play, a body of dancers. Narrative, eventually, really has to observe that “it is only in the chorus that a certain truth might be found”. As we stated that Kafkian longed equilibrium is in motion, little surprise will be that such a chorus as a model belongs to the domain of movement: it is a dance as a kinetic *agencement* of enunciating gestures. Like John Blacking puts it, “We may look beyond the ‘languages’ of dancing, for instance, to the dances of language and thought. As conscious movement is in our thinking, so thinking may come from movement, and especially shared, or conceptual, thought from communal movement” (Blacking 1977, pp. 22-23). Musician dogs express a superior unity by making moves together, so to build a choreography that transforms life's energy, as unstable, dipolar, ambiguous it may be, in something else which still manifests its very being. We will return on this in section 4; before, a clarification about translation between models is now needed.

3. Interlinguistics and intersemiotics

Kafka's writing in an anti-grammatical manner is due to his pursuing the model of a choral performance. By doing so, he puts in literary form the features of a different modality through which reality expresses itself, in order to preserve and convey the balance upon which true objects hover all the time: in other terms, Kafka is already translating as he writes, his writing is a translation. This could seem pretty trivial if one holds a general account of translation, for linguistic signs can be regarded as a sort of complex translation of things and thoughts (Fabbri 1998); that is why it was important to discuss and establish a relationship between different expressive models, levels, and media, because their insertion in the calculus allows to specify the dissertation in a less banal sense. To wit, it is crucial to notice that there is a mutation from one semiotic system to another.

We should therefore distinguish between translations. In general, a translation is a passage of something from a state to another (from Latin *trans-ducere*, to bring through), preserving its essential traits or its overall meaning. Roman Jakobson notoriously proposed a tripartition of the forms this general account is apt to specify itself in practice: “1) Intralingual translation or rewording in an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. 2) Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. 3) Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of nonverbal sign systems” (Jakobson 1959, p. 261). As Nicola Dusi points out commenting on this topic, “intersemiotic translation can provisionally



be said to take place when there is a re-presentation, in one or more semiotic systems with a different purport and substances of expression, of a form of the content intersubjectively recognized as being linked, at one or more levels of pertinence, to the form of the content of a source text” (Dusi 2015, p. 184). It is clear that Kafka’s writing would be a case of this latter kind of translation, but reversed from a nonverbal sign system to a verbal one: so we can label it as an intersemiotic or transmutative writing. A major problem arises here: whichever kind of translation one is talking about, it is always a relationship between two signs, two texts. Kafka doesn’t have any available token in advance to begin with; he directly translates the laws of dancing into anti-grammatical writing. Is it still possible to define it as a translation? Wouldn’t it be better to call it a cross-semiotic, or cross-modal art, since it integrates choral architectural principles with the layers of meaning of language? Maybe it would. But beware that the two modalities envisaged here do not actually integrate: language is, after all, a lie put at service of truth by copying its impossible form and thus denouncing its inability to ever achieve it. However, cross-modality is in another sense a cypher of Kafkian prose, since, as we have seen, its model goes beyond the opposition between sensorial dimensions, and anti-grammar is employed just so that the scaffolding that the choral model offers in order to enact reality is transferred to literature. One could say that Kafka precisely transmutes cross-modality, synthetized as kinetic energy of a plurality in motion, into his writing – so again, we come back to intersemiotic translation and its problematic predicament. But the detour hasn’t been futile: even though there is no sign prior to the alleged translation, indeed we found that a virtual scaffolding, the diagram detailing the cross-modal form of relation, is already there. Kafka’s work is choral “as if” – and so its transmutational statute.

We can then conclude that a common mistake consists in considering the task of Kafka’s translator to carry about a simple interlingual translation. Admittedly, Kafka produced texts, that can be translated in this fashion. But that would exhaust his prose only if Kafka wrote in a grammatical way – his anti-grammatical texts try instead to emulate a model that the target language has to emulate too. That is the reason why a more accurate translation of Kafka’s work should keep that the semiotic system of dance is involved. Therefore, a reconstruction of this model may be useful in order to put translation at test, to verify that they literally live up to the lively Kafkian transmutation of choral life.

4. The Terpsichore’s muse project¹³

For, what is the idea of chorus Kafka attaches this much importance to, and what consequent semiotic relevance does it bear? At the turn of XIX and XX century, especially in Germanophone Europe, the concept of Greek chorus is tied to one and only name – Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy Kafka knew very well, and to some extent made his¹⁴. Early in his career and then all along his life (Sokel 2005), Nietzsche had devoted his work to herald Dionysianism as the true experience of reality; and indeed, his opposition between Apollonian and Dionysian closely resembles and might have inspired Kafkian distinction between falsity and truth. No wonder that Walter Sokel affirmed that among the ideas Kafka and Nietzsche have in common, the first and foremost is Dionysianism: for them both, “Dionysian oneness is not static but dynamic. It is not substance but cosmic energy. What is One is not a static substantive being but an ever-active, ever-creative, and ever-destructive energy” (Sokel 2011, p. 65). Now, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche notoriously asserted that Greek tragedy, the most perfect aesthetic expression of the oneness of things, originated from the chorus, as a body of dancers in honor of Dionysos (Nietzsche 2000). It is therefore extremely plausible that Kafkian choral model is a Nietzschean-Dionysian one.

As we are questioning how all this can weight in Kafka’s oeuvre, we may complement Dionysos with another deity more suitable for semiotics. Indeed, that would be the field of Apollon, who guarantees an

¹³ I owe many inspiring insights about choral dance, Nietzsche and Dionysianism to Arianna Sarubbi, whom I thank here.

¹⁴ As Reinhold Grimm (1979) has reconstructed, Klaus Wagenbach affirms that Kafka was “still” Nietzschean in 1902 (Wagenbach 1958, p. 102), and Walter Sokel reports Kafka bestowing *The Birth of Tragedy* to Gustav Janouch in his “later” years (Sokel 1964, p. 545).



albeit flawed order which is indispensable for the sake of the analysis; and as the aesthetic ordering of matter can follow many principles, let us turn to the goddesses embodying them, i.e. the muses. Among them, Terpsichore would certainly be the one inspiring Kafka, since, as her name shall suggest, she is the patron of choral dance. One could state that, following Dionysos, Kafka is compelled to write after Terpsichore, as muses allow to put into an aesthetic expression the true experience of reality; which would be twisting, since Terpsichore is the wrong muse to do literature, but becomes the right one in the perspective of Dionysianism. To write after Terpsichore, as alien as this principle can be to prose, is to write as an intersemiotic translation.

Semiotically speaking, Terpsichore puts Dionysian into order by assigning it as functional and structural unit the gesture. Gesture and anti-grammar (as it has been described so far) are akin on many layers. Drawing upon Albert Guillaume, André Spire (1949) claimed that kinaesthetic gesture is the source of synaesthesia and poetry, which is consistent with the cross-modal scaffolding chorus is imputed to promote. For Pierluigi Basso Fossali, the gesture is “l’emblème de l’option d’un sens transversal, jamais protégé par des juridictions de sens cohérentes” (Basso Fossali 2017, p. 84), and also “maître d’exemplification; même quand il est ritualisé, il est hiératique ou irrévérencieux, il sort de l’acte de l’énonciation (soulèvement) à travers un manque de respect pour une thématization cohérente et univoque. D’ailleurs, le geste expose un sens ‘originaire’ car il n’accepte pas le partage net de la signification entre perception et énonciation, il reste la propitiation d’une interférence à accorder, d’une cogestion du sens” (*ivi*, p. 89): here we find the balance of a plurality in motion that inscribes the gesture into a chorus. And about the relationship between gesture and language, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty any act of *parole* “se forme par prélèvement sur une signification gestuelle” (Merleau-Ponty 2001, p. 209)¹⁵.

These three points of contact signal as many influences on writing. First, as Verónica Estay Stange noticed about Spire’s positions, the pre-eminence of kinaesthetic gesture, which is, in its cross-modal nature, “fondamentalement motrice et préhensive”, leads to the conclusion that “dans la langue le sens rythmique précède le sens sémantique” (Estay Stange 2023, pp. 47-48). Second, Basso Fossali observes that “le geste atteint, pique au vif les “callosités” des frontières domaniales. Par conséquent, en affichant ses solutions figurales, l’énonciation énoncée semble refléter dans le texte une lacération praxique et institutionnelle qui pourrait s’exprimer ailleurs. Le figural n’est que la gestualité repliée dans les espaces étriqués des textes” (Basso Fossali 2017, p. 87), a figural device being a mechanism that secours le manque de sens avec un cadre substitutif que nous pouvons définir comme ‘plastique’ selon une double acception, (1) adaptatif par rapport à la situation incidente, et (2) constitué d’un théâtre diagrammatique de forces et de réactions abstraites extraites de cette dernière” (*ivi*, p. 34). Third, as analyzed by David Piotrowski in his reading of Merleau-Ponty,

la gesticulation verbale procède par entrecroisement, recouvrements, d’une part, et convergence, condensation d’autre part. Parler, c’est enchaîner, superposer et progressivement intégrer une série

¹⁵ *Discours, figure* by Jean-François Lyotard provides many intriguing suggestions that resonate with what has been stated so far. Indeed, the figural space that according to his doctrine edges the discourse within and without it and disrupts it, bringing forth an aesthetic feeling of reality, closely resembles the orthogonality that Kafka induces by anti-grammatically disrupting his prose to deliver a satisfying expression of things. In a central passage, borrowing the idea from an anecdote about Paul Klee, Lyotard describes this effect like a dance: “Le tableau [...] Klee disait qu’il est à brouter, il fait voir, il s’offre à l’oeil comme une chose exemplaire, comme une nature naturante, disait encore Klee, puisqu’il fait voir ce qu’est voir. Or il fait voir que voir est une danse. [...] Un discours est épais. Il ne signifie pas seulement, il exprime. Et s’il exprime, c’est qu’il a lui aussi du bougé consigné en lui, du mouvement, de la force, pour soulever la table des significations par un séisme qui fait le sens. Lui aussi se donne à brouter, et pas seulement à comprendre” (Lyotard 1971, pp. 14-15). Then, he devotes an important part of the text to analyzing the notion and the function of gesture within this perspective, and links the dissertation to the couple Apollonian and Dionysian: “Même quand il est manifeste que quelque chose déconstruit l’ordre de la signification pour y susciter du sens, il n’est pas facile d’identifier ce quelque chose, parce qu’il persiste à se manifester travesti: ce que le phénoménologue voit dans le désordre poétique, c’est l’intrusion de la nature dans le langage, c’est au plus la constitution de celui-ci en visible-invisible. Il ne voit pas que [...] le dieu qui nous a préparé le festin des figures n’est pas Apollon. Mais ce n’est qu’à moitié la faute du philosophe: Dionysos, nocturne, refoulé, revêt le masque de lumière pour paraître” (*ivi*, p. 295).



de gestes verbaux élémentaires qui in fine installent devant eux, comme point focale des tensions qui les animent, une certaine signification [...] il ne s'agit donc pas de resservir des significations verbalement encodées, mais d'user des mots de façon telle que "les recouplements se multiplient et que plus de flèches se dessinent vers ce lieu de pensée où je ne suis jamais allé auparavant" (Piotrowski 2020, p. 12)¹⁶.

To line up all Terpsichore's advices, we can assume that to Kafkian prose are essential the following features: the rhythm, to which pertain the disposition, the length, the quantity, the accents, the syllables of words, and punctuation – in one term, the prosody; the figural clusters, i.e. plastic signs whose sense isn't decided yet (and will never be, except provisionally), adapted to the scene that is being narrated but nevertheless embedding the diagram of a fulfillment to come; a reticular stratification of their series in a way that they progressively interact, both expanding and entangling their sequences of meaning, and letting the overall harmony appear. The task of the translator, we may now assert, should consist in preserving and making palpable (wherever might be) these elements.

Choral gestures conjure the musician dogs' music, thus giving to the model a structural unity: it is what has been called *agencement collectif d'énonciation*. The oneness springing despite, or better thanks to anti-grammatical semantic and syntactic violations, gives to Kafkian work a tone which could be seen as an acid test of a good translation. As Nietzsche stated about Dionysianism, "art draws near as the enchantress who comes to rescue and heal; only she can reshape that disgust at the thought of the horrific or absurd aspects of life into notions with which it is possible to live: these are the *sublime*, the artistic taming of the horrific, and the *comic*, the artistic discharge of disgust at the absurd" (Nietzsche 2000, pp. 46-47). This is peculiarly true of Kafka's prose. In order to tell if prosody, figures and harmony of Kafkian choral model have been properly maintained, the translation should sound sublime and comic. Sublime: it should astonish. Comic: it should make one laugh. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant stated that as sublime "is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness", its effect is to highlight the limits of faculties, so that "that which, without our indulging in any refinements of thought, but, simply in our apprehension of it, excites the feeling of the sublime, may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to do violence, as it were, to the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account" (Kant 2007, pp. 75-76); and as a conclusive note to the *Analytic of Sublime*, he observed that "something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. Laughter is an affect arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing" (*ivi*, p. 161). From these pages, that both Nietzsche and Kafka should have known, comic seems to relate to sublime in that it is a possible solution to the *impasse* of faculties the former produce (like exhibiting an absurd, anti-grammatical narrative): for such absurdity is apt to boost a laughter by means of which limits are regarded as null. To sum up, a good translation of Kafka's work should result in a text that engages the reader in order to both make her feel her limits and offering her the opportunity to have an orthogonal glimpse of them, to see them vanishing into the condition of a continuity with life, and consequently rejoice, just like the musician dogs' performance:

The music gradually took over, it positively seized one, it swept one away from these real little dogs, and quite against one's will, resisting with all one's might, howling as if in pain, one was forced to attend solely to the music, this music that came from all sides, from the heights, from the depths, from everywhere, carrying the listener along with it, overwhelming him, crushing him, and blaring still – so close that it seemed far away and barely audible – blaring its fanfares over his shattered being. And then one was given a respite, being by now too exhausted, too shattered, too weak to hear any more, one was given a respite from the noise and saw the seven little dogs performing their movements, making their leaps, one longed to call out to them despite their aloofness, to beg them for enlightenment, to ask them what they were doing – I was a child and thought I could ask anybody about anything – but hardly had I got ready to speak, hardly had I begun to feel that good, familiar, doggish sense of fellowship with the seven, when back came their music again, robbed me of my

¹⁶ The quotation from Merleau-Ponty refers to Merleau-Ponty (1969, p. 19).



senses, whirled me round in circles, as if I myself were one of the musicians and not merely their victim, flung me to and fro, however much I begged for mercy, and finally rescued me from its own violence by driving me into a tangled thicket which grew up round that spot, though I had not noticed it before, and which now held me fast, forced my head down low, and gave me a chance to draw breath despite the music that still thundered in the open (Kafka 2002a).

By reflecting upon Kafka's Terpsichorean model, it is possible to prompt translation in a way that is more accurate from a philosophical point of view. Wherever philology is out of arguments to directly improve the comprehension, it can nevertheless guide, together with a humanistic awareness, a semiotic analysis of transmutational structures involved. By being responsive to the same scaffolding Kafka elected to his prose, new avenues of faithfulness to the original can be opened up. Hence, translating Kafka may become in the future an overt exercise to test and think about the attainable effects of an intersemiotic relationship between dance and languages, both the source and the target one, and trespass the domain of simple intralinguistic translation.



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