

**Odradek: This is a word's world, but it would be nothing without the
creature, or the text**

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Abstract

“The Cares of a Family Man”, Kafka’s 474-word text has attracted the minds of a number of inspiring philosophers and literary critics such as Walter Benjamin, Werner Hamacher, and J. Hillis Miller. The magnificence of this piece of writing is the unique relation between the word “Odradek” and the creature with the same name; that is what this essay is mostly concentrated on, and where the paradoxes in Hamacher and Miller studies of this story shows up; points such as the significant difference between being meaningless and meaning meaningless, and the extremely specific name-named relation in this particular text, an arrow that just points and refuses to dedicate any sort of meaning to the named entity. Following these, this essay proposes a study of “Biodegradable” by Derrida in order to erect a critical analysis of Hamacher and Miller’s endeavor to decompose the word Odradek. The discussion will be continued in the second chapter then on the connections between Odradek-Hausvater and Speech-Logos, based on a critical reading of Derrida’s “Disseminations”, in particular on the metaphor of “The Father of Logos”. In the end, a few patterns will be proposed for the twofold set of Odradek-Hausvater, and the concepts of voice, death, and boundary will be investigated.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Derrida, Kafka, Hamacher.

Call me Odradek

"I use Kafka's 474-word text as a way of thinking what results from a shift from an organic unity model to a technological model as a paradigm for thinking in various domains." (Miller 2012: 66). As Miller himself mentioned, he uses Kafka's text as a case study to examine what will happen if we substitute an organic model with a technical one in the understanding of a particular issue.

Miller claims that all four main elements of Kafka's text, the name "Odradek", the text about it, the narrator and the "thing" called Odradek have a common technological deconstruction. For Miller, they are all little machines, singular and contradictorily machine-like. They are 'Machine-like' as they are all made of parts and are put in the service of making something that works , some other techné'. They are singular as each of them has a crack, a "cloudy place" as Benjamin describes Kafka's parable. In Miller's opinion, this extreme non-mechanicality in the story is lacking both meaning and an identifiable purpose.

Miller's essay as a whole is an attempt to put forward the idea that: "Odradek is a robot, a technological construct that seems to have been made by someone not very good at designing robots, or rather it is difficult to imagine that it had any designer at all. It seems to be a product of techné' without a technician ." (Miller 2012: 84) and extend it into a universal idea about the whole ecosystem, in order to show that the human being and his ecosystem may be the product of chance alterations over a long period of time which have never got it quite right from the point of what we human beings think would be good for us.

What I want to discuss here is not just the cloudy space in Kafka's story, but the paradoxical and unanswered issue in Miller's theory. Miller's proposed model is based on the essential point that the word "Odradek" *has no meaning*. In order to accept this theory, there is one vital necessity, one unavoidable presumption: Odradek *has* no meaning. In the paragraph: "The best model I know to describe these strange structures is to say that...each seems to be lacking meaning and identifiable purpose" (Miller 2012: 75). In order to work on this part, he had no choice other than to use Hamacher's essay on Kafka. Miller interprets Hamacher in a way that authenticates his idea about the word "Odradek" and subsequently, his whole essay. "Hamacher repeatedly insists that the upshot of this paronomastic investigation is not to identify the meaning, however complex of the word "Odradek", *but to confirm its lack of meaning or its paradoxical meaning as asserting that it is outside any meaning*, that it means meaninglessness." (Miller 2012: 79). I will discuss Hamacher's essay on Kafka later in this essay but on Miller's misreading, it is not necessary to involve Hamacher that much. It is hidden in the word "or" in the previous quotation. What Hamacher offers to Miller is a meaning for the word "Odradek", even though what he wishes for is the term to lack any meaning. Using "or" in this quote is a fault, as these two ideas are not the same. If it means 'meaningless' then the word Odradek has a particular meaning and is not an empty structure; it shows that Odradek does not have a creator who is weak in naming creatures, thus Odradek does not have any crack, it just has a particular name, he is not even singular in this respect. Its having a meaning, any meaning - even "meaningless" - undermines

Miller's whole theory. Meaning "meaningless" is not the same as being meaningless. He mistakenly interprets both of these as the same thing: meaninglessness. He willingly accepted Hamacher's essay because he expected the results that he required, not caring that it undermines his work. What does Hamacher claim about Odradek?

Hamacher sees all Kafka's special names in his texts as a coded anagram of "Franz Kafka". For instance, "Kafka" is transformed into "Jackdaw" and "Raver". Through a series of German, Czech and Latin words Hamacher tries to trace out a possible connection between them and Odradek, and tries to show that Odradek's name "means" that it does not mean.

If I want to summarize Hamacher's work in the essay: "The Gesture in The Name", I would mention the words that he attempts to interpret as the ones with the same or similar root as Odradek: Rada, Rat, rad, radek, Reda, Verrater, ratio, Od-Rabe-K, Od-rade-K, Od-raven-K, Od-adresa, rade-Rabe, radix, Kavka, Kafka, Od-radix, odroditi, odraditi, odrodek, odranka, odrek, odranec, odrbati, odrati, odrod, odrodek, odrh. He tries to extend the meaning of these words to define a certain structure for the word "Odradek". The final meaning that can be interpreted from these connections for the word "Odradek" is "meaningless".

I wonder about Hamacher's emphasis in his work on the word "mean" in the structure of his sentences about Odradek. Hamacher says that "Odradek" *means* dissidence, dissensus and a defection from the order of meaning. "Odradek" thus "means" that it does not mean... *his names say that he has no name*. (Hamacher 1996: 321)

In this passage, there is a clear stress on the point that Odradek's name says something, means something, saying that it says nothing. This unity between meaning and saying something on the one hand and being something on the other hand, is the issue that probably misleads Miller; but what is wonderful about Hamacher's proposed theory, about his insistence on the structure of the names and the meanings behind them, is that although he strongly confirms the name-meaning structure in Kafka's work in his conclusions, he offers a contradictory presumption at the beginning of the essay. Hamacher claims: "These words –like Kavka- "mean" "Kafka" only from afar; they mean something other than "Kafka", *and they always do something other than mean*" (Hamacher 1996: 318). What does "do something other than mean" mean? I would suggest a one to one correspondence between the name (signifier) and the named (signified). But it is still too early to draw this conclusion as the quotation is a little bit vague. Let us go further. Another paragraph from the same essay: "In Kafka's staging of his name, a certain trait makes itself known that marks every name in its singularity: the name does not belong to a system of language that communicates something but to the *markings* in this system whose only function is to secure communicability itself. *The markings do not "say" anything, they mark*. In this sense, they are the place most resistant to meaning in any system generally disposed toward meaning." (Hamacher 1996: 373)

This is Hamacher's view at the beginning of this essay. Hamacher directly claims that the system between names and named things in Kafka's work is "marking", not "meaning" or "saying". It can be concluded that the names in such a system do not endow any sort of meaning to the named things, they just point to them. Marking in this quotation is no more than pointing,

calling, highlighting; they do not offer anything more than a bijection, a one to one correspondence; a name which points to a named thing and a named thing which bears a name. The creature called Odradek and the name Odradek are just the elements of two different sets, the set of creatures (things) and the set of names, paired with each other by an arrow. No matter what Odradek means, whether it means "nameless", "meaningless", or "coconut", this meaning does not say anything about, or refer to, the creature whose name is Odradek. The creature's *name* might *be* meaningless (or may mean nameless), but *he is not* himself (the creature) nameless (meaningless). He bears a name in any case.

In order to interpret Kafka's story, there is still another major question regarding the name "Odradek", namely: Is the method Hamacher utilized in his essay, in other words, decomposing the word "Odradek" into its possible natural parts, which compose this whole word together, an acceptable, or at least possible, practice? Let us assume that Hamacher did not mention those points concerning the interconnections between the names and the creatures in that essay, would it be an acceptable procedure to deconstruct the word "Odradek" to "Od-rade-k" for instance, and trace the possible connections and roots in the German or Czech languages? What will give us the authority, as an interpreter of Kafka's short story, to do this? What will be the consequences? I think the best way to answer these questions is to focus on Derrida's text, "Biodegradable".

Biodegradability in general can be defined as an artificial, in particular, an industrial product that can be decomposed by microorganisms. The biodegradable is a non-thing, as it is a thing which refuses to remain, it is essentially decomposable and so lacks a permanent identity.

Derrida's key question then helps us to make a connection between biodegradables and non-biodegradables on the one hand, and the word Odradek on the other hand. Derrida asks: "Is this synthetic object, the word "biodegradable", biodegradable?" (Derrida 1989: 815). In other words, he tries to extend the argument and the medium of biodegradables from industrial objects to words and context. It is possible to think that biodegradable, which is an artificial word, pluri-etymological as Derrida himself describes it, this synthetic composite, should be more decomposable than many other words. It is expected to be replaced or to vanish as soon as possible. However, it should not be forgotten that this word barely belongs to a language; it is not completely Greek or Latin, and is just a little bit techno scientific; in short, it is a foreigner. Derrida continues: "This parasitic non-belonging and this character of artificial synthesis that render the word less biodegradable than some other word; because it does not belong to the organic compost of a single natural language." (Derrida 1989: 815)

Similarity, the word "Odradek" does not belong to the organic compost of a language, even though Hamacher attempts to degrade it to its so-called *natural parts*. The question is whether Hamacher can claim that the word Odradek and everything that is attached to the word (everything that delivers itself over to the word or is delivered up by it) is purely biodegradable, given Derrida's stress on the point that composition, recomposition, and decomposition can influence the essence of language and the significant meaning of the words. I will discuss why it cannot be acceptable to decompose the word Odradek later, but it can be said that Derrida enlightens us here, and confirms that in the act of decomposition, it is not certain that we can

extend the meaning of the words achieved in decomposition to the main word that is decomposed. "Od-rade-k" or in other words "Od", "rade", and "k" cannot be guaranteed to carry the very meaning they hold in the word "Odradek".

Subsequently, Derrida explains that in a "non-biodegradable" thing, the singularity of the work resists and survives; just like an indestructible thing, or at least a thing which is less destructible than others. What can be purely non-biodegradable? A "proper name".

Derrida continues: "The proper name belongs neither to language nor to the element of conceptual generality. In this regard, every work survives like and as a proper name." (Derrida 1989: 824). For Derrida, there is a wide range of cases standing between the purely biodegradable and the non-biodegradable. That is why he defines "The proper name *effect*". For Derrida it is almost impossible to define a "Purely uncontaminable proper name" or any form of "absolute indestructibility". The proper name shares and divides this effect in all its parts and beyond its title with other proper names. In the manner of this "proper name", Derrida claims that the work is singular; therefore, as a singular proper name, it must be less biodegradable. A non-biodegradable, such as "Odradek", has a unique singularity, just as Hamacher remarked repeatedly. It will instill and create its own traditions, and in Derrida's words will inscribe itself there as "inassimilable, indeed unreadable". (Derrida 1989: 825)

This "unreadability" can be interpreted as "non-interpretability". It can be understood as the feature which is "not being known or understood". The non-biodegradability is impossible to be followed for a trace or signature. "The "proper name" in question –*which has no meaning and is not a concept*- is not to be reduced to the appellation of civil status. What is more, it is *proper to nothing and to no one*, reappropriable to nothing and by no one, *not even by the presumed bearer*." (Derrida 1989: 845). There is not much left to say after this. The proper name, the non-biodegradable, in short, is the name without meaning, a "non-concept", irreducible and non-decomposable. "Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis, others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. the uncertainty of both in interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate" (Kafka 1995: 427). As mentioned before, it is impossible to connect a non-biodegradable word such as "Odradek" to a certain natural language; besides, it is not possible either to extend the meaning of the decomposed parts of a word (even if biodegradable) to the main composed word with certainty, which leads to the uncertainty that Hausvater mentions and concludes with the necessity that such an interpretation be rejected. Hausvater continues the previous quotation: "... especially, as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word." (Kafka 1995: 427). Just as I discussed with Derrida's text and Hamacher's essay, that which is non-biodegradable is unreceivable, inassimilable to something meaningful; it is not in the order of meaning, it is not a part of the universal wealth of the message or meaning.

Finally, Hausvater says: "no one, of course, would occupy himself with such studies if there were not a creature called Odradek." (Kafka 1995: 427). This quote can be taken as a confirmation of Hamacher's presumption that I discussed earlier. The relationship between the word "Odradek" and the creature whose name is Odradek, is not more than a marking or a one to

one correspondence. The name here does not act as a carrier of any message or meaning, it just points to its bearer. It may not only be a hopeless task to ask "what does Odradek mean?", but also to be asking the wrong question. The only right question regarding the word "Odradek" in the text is "to whom does it point?". Thus for the rest of this essay, I will consider this word as a name which marks the creature with the same name. A word in the service of this particular text (Kafka's story), a non-biodegradable and non-decomposable word, an indestructible structure, an "Arrow", and no more.

Agree and Disagree

On 8th and 9th, April 2019, Goldsmith University of London was the host of a series of conferences on the topic of a newly found text by Derrida, "Geschlecht III". One of the most interesting lectures was given by Adam Rosenthal. He tried to explain in his lecture, in which he used the short story by Kafka "Die Sorge des Hausvaters" as his main case study, the lack of a clear theory of paternity and a certain definition of the word *Geschlecht* (sex, race, nation, humanity and family and etc.) in Derrida's texts. Rosenthal's work was focused on a particular reading of Kafka's short story in which "Odradek" is known as an element in the story who is not a *Geschlecht* of the family. And modeling Odradek's hazy relationship with Hausvater, this estrangement in the story, as the lack of the son-father relation in Derrida's work. Now I want to offer a new critical reading of a few essays of Derrida and search for a father-son relationship, and use it for a new interpretation of Kafka's short story. I want to share how I agree and disagree with Rosenthal.

In the essay "Plato's Pharmacy", Derrida starts the second chapter with the story of the king of all Egypt, *Thamus*, who represents *Amon*, the god of gods, and one of the old gods of Egypt, *Theuth*, the inventor of numbers. Based on the story, *Theuth* offers his latest invention, writing, to the king. The king (evaluator) considers the gift as a "*Pharmakon*" which has a destructive effect on memory and wisdom, as writing outlives people. In another myth in this essay, Derrida introduces *Thoth*, the god of the moon, who is representative of his father, *Ra*, who is the god of gods and representative of the sun. In both these myths, *Logos* (the written speech, the immortal one) is modeled as the son, the lower class god, and speech is the self-reliant god, needless but mortal.

The first two words in Rosenthal's essay (paternity establishing) attracts my attention the most. As Derrida emphasized in the name of the second chapter in his essay ("The Father of Logos"), he directly asks the question: "who is a father?" (Derrida 1981: 81). What Derrida tries to offer next is an elaboration on the concept of the father, in the father-son relation based on the Speech-Logos connection. "It is precisely Logos that enables us to perceive and investigate something like paternity" (Derrida 1981: 80). What Derrida offers here is a general reversal of metaphorical direction; instead of "Logos" achieving meaning from the concept of "father" in the metaphor the "father of Logos", it is the "father" that receives the meaning. Derrida expresses this idea in a short sentence: "a Logos indebted to a father" (Derrida 1981: 81).

I disagree with Rosenthal as Derrida clarifies the father-son relationship in a close connection with Speech-Logo-cognition.

"often he stays *mute* for a long time, as *wooden* as his appearance." (Kafka 1995: 428).

"*What is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die?*" (Kafka 1995: 428).

"He will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of *my children, and my children's children*... the idea that *he is likely to survive me* I find almost painful." (Kafka 1995: 429).

The nervousness of a mortal creature towards an immortal one which will outlive him is obviously a reminder of the Speech-Logos relationship in which Logos, as a written work and immortal element, will outlive the speech. It remains just as Odradek will remain and live, and that is what bothers Hausvater most.

Derrida shares this point in Plato's Pharmacy: "writing, in that it repeats itself and remains identical in the type, cannot flex itself in all senses, cannot bend with all the differences among presents, with all the variable, fluid, furtive necessities of Psychagogy" (Derrida 1981: 114).

Being as wooden as its appearance and mute towards questions other those of name and place, are representative of an inflexibility that Derrida describes as a feature of writing. In other words, Odradek's lack of flexibility or inability to bend recalls the exact same features of Logos. Therefore, it can be said that the Speech-Logos connection can be a pattern for the Hausvater-Odradek relationship. Again, another one to one correspondence between two sets of elements.

The only dark point here concerns the metaphor of "The father of Logos" in Derrida's essay. Derrida explains: "if there were a simple metaphor in the expression "father of Logos" the first word, which seemed the *more familiar*, would never the less receive more meaning from the second than it would *transmit to it*... living-being, father and son, are announced to us and related to each other within the household of Logos." (Derrida 1981: 81). He argues then that "the father of Logos" is not a simple metaphor and just as I explained earlier, a reverse metaphorical relation occurs here, and "Logos" turns into the familiar part of the metaphor with which, based on its familiarity, we will be able to receive a meaning and interpret the concept of "father" and a "father-son" relationship. My main question here is 'what is Logos?', or firstly, 'what is the Being of Logos?' And does this very Being let us consider it as the familiar, known part of the metaphor, which can export a certain level of meaning? Derrida describes Logos, which is modeled by "*Thoth*", as "a floating signifier", "the floating in determination that allows for substitution and play" (Derrida 1981: 93), a god that "not being there can properly be his own" (Derrida 1981: 93), an "unstable ambivalence" (Derrida 1981: 93) and the God who is never present.

Although it is not obvious here what the Being is of such an entity (and I do not dare yet to announce it as Dasein), one point is undeniable, namely that such an entity, which, in Derrida's words, not being there is his own, cannot be identified as a being with ready-to-hand or present-at-hand Being. Therefore, how is it possible to consider it as the familiar, known element of a metaphor which can offer meaning for an unknown element? Is it possible to erect a theory of paternity of an entity for which "absence" can properly be his own? The foundation of this paternity and the possibility of the mentioned interpretation of the "Die Sorge des Hausvaters"

are based on a "yes" in reply to the previous question. Thus, I unwillingly agree with Rosenthal at the end, even though he was not aware of this contradiction.

Voice, Death, Boundary

"He says and laughs, but it is only the kind of laughter that *has no lungs behind it*. It sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves." (Kafka 1995: 428).

"Odradek's laughter is directed, oddly, toward the assertion that he has no permanent residence. *It is an inhuman sound*, like that produced by the rustling of fallen leaves." (Miller 2012: 84).

In both the story and Miller characterization of it, Odradek's laughter is an inhuman voice. But before that, first of all, it is unexpected, weird; in other words, just as Odradek himself, its Being and existence is a surprise. This laugh is the presence of something which should be absent. It is purely uncanny in this respect. However, this is not a usual voice. Lacking any lungs behind it, the sound has an inhuman characteristic. The lack of humanity due to the absence of this feature brings singularity to this creature, his laughter, and the story. Voice is a medium that underlies self-presence, self-transparency and inscribes the other, the uncanny into the self. Byung-Chul Han followed the element of voice in Kafka's other works. In Kafka's "Castle", the castle "manifests itself as a voice" (Han 2018: 51): "From the mouthpiece came a humming, the likes of which K. had never heard on the telephone before. It was as though the humming of countless childlike voices -but it wasn't humming either, it was singing, the singing of the most distant, of the most utterly distant, voices- as though a single, high pitched yet strong voice had emerged out of this humming in some quite impossible way and now drummed against one's ears as if demanding to penetrate more deeply into something other than one's wretched hearing." (Kafka 1998: 20).

Voice is Kafka's preferred medium for the entirely other, for the creature on the other side of the boundary. What K. hears on the telephone is not a simple voice or dialogue. It is not speaking or discourse; it is not intelligible words. It is a voice from the other. It is a sign from the other being, from the outside. It is the presence of an element which normally should be absent, but this is not; it is uncanny. At the same time, it is a voice which lacks human intelligibility. Hausvater heard a burst of laughter which should have a lung behind it but it does not. The sign, the voice must have a sense of humanity but it does not. It is the absence of what should be present. It is *erie*. In short, what Kafka offers is a double-edged sword; eerie and uncanny at the same time.

The next question regarding the absence of an element of humanity and immortality of Odradek is the nature of his life. How can a creature lack some elements of life? Is he alive? How is it possible to be immortal? *Is being immortal equal to being alive forever?* And finally, how can these questions help us from a different interpretation of Kafka's story? How can it offer us a new model?

In the essay "The Time for Poetry" Peter Dayan follows the connection between life, animals and poetry in Heidegger, Derrida and Lacan's works. I think this connection is extremely closely

related to our questions. Dayan argues that mortality is humanity's condition. Mortality comes from human's thoughts; it takes the form of knowledge. We, as human beings, communicate and name ourselves and finally when one of us dies, he/she will be named individually; thus every death will be unique and separated from the other ones. Therefore, mortality and naming are in a close correlation. Unlike us, poetry and animals give themselves *no names that belong to the living*. Dayan claims: "The poem must be abandoned by the living. It must be left. It cannot be unknown; it cannot *speak its name*; it can only be learned by heart, entire. *It is not individually alive and therefore it cannot die.*" (Dayan 2009: 11). It is obviously ridiculous to discuss this idea biologically, as from that point of view, it is certain that animals can die; so what is the kind of this immortality exactly? It can be said that the reason that we claim that animals cannot die, is that they are not individually alive. How can an entity who isn't individually alive, die? Isn't being alive, at the first stage, a must for dying? Derrida widely discusses this idea in "L'animal que donc je suis" that animals are immortal just in the sense that they *can't* die, or in other words, they can't know what we call death. Odradek's immortality then can be interpreted as his lack of knowledge about death in the way that humans understand it. He isn't immortal as he biologically will not die, he will not die as he is not individually alive; he has never been so. He is immortal with his strange name that doesn't belong to the living as he isn't capable of death, the death that we understand. Dayan ends his essay with a sentence which can help us to complete our model: "in the time of philosophy, we know, we name, we live and then we die. In the time of poetry, we lose our name, and we become as immortal as a singing bird." (Dayan 2009: 13). Now, the bipolar set of Odradek-Hausvater can accept another one to one correspondence, this time with Poetry-Philosophy.

As I mentioned earlier, the voice from the other is a symbol of *crossing borders* in Kafka's works. Reinhold Görling's and Johan Schimanski's work on the concept of "sovereignty" can be helpful for a clearer understanding of this aspect of Kafka's story. They explain that in Hobbs's theory of sovereignty, the sovereign represents Leviathan. This fictional work, Leviathan, is created by men by agreement and a rational common imagination. The sovereign, as he only represents Leviathan, cannot be a part of these men. Following that, they explain: "There is a line of transference of this model to the family contract, which is represented by the Hausvater. As sovereign is inside and outside of the law, the Hausvater is part of the family and outside the family, representing its idea to the inside as well as to the outside. The sovereign keeps the border under surveillance, the border of the state as well as the border of the house." (Görling et al. 2018: 111). The writers offer an interpretation of the story based on considering Hausvater as the sovereign. In the same chapter, they concentrate on a less-discussed question in regard to Kafka's story: who named the creature "Odradek"? one of the key points in the story is that Odradek, himself, in answering the Hausvater's question about his name introduced himself and used the word Odradek. He is the one who named himself. The magnificence of this fact is that naming a child (as Odradek is described in the story) is a task, a right, *Sorge* of its parents, or in other words, an act which falls under the sovereignty of the Hausvater. By naming himself, Odradek disobeys this unwritten rule and undermines Hausvater's sovereignty. For Hausvater, his children are objects of *sorge*, he had this right to name them; however, Odradek neither needs

this care nor lets Hausvater name him. In addition to the immortality of Odradek, this rebellion may be another reason for Hausvater's nervousness.

In conclusion, the close critical reading of the word "Odradek" with which I started helped me to offer a critical analysis of Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" in the second section. Subsequently, I offered a few original interpretations of the story in the third chapter. Although I introduced the ideas of the eerie and the uncanny in the last section, further work on these concepts and their signs in Kafka's stories is called for.

Taher Djaout writes: "Silence is death, and you, if you talk, you die, and if you remain silent, you die, so, speak out and die." I chose to speak and I shared almost all I had. And now, it seems to be a perfect time to die.

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