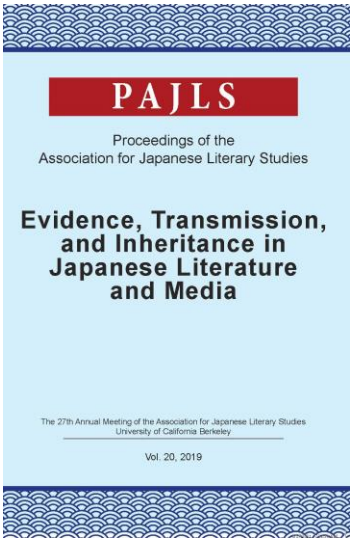
“Fate, Transmission and the Boy Named Crow in Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore*”

Michele Eduarda Brasil de Sá

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 20 (2019): 96–105.



PAJLS 20:
Evidence, Transmission, and Inheritance in Japanese Literature and Media.
Editor: Matthew Mewhinney
Managing Editor: Matthew Fraleigh

FATE, TRANSMISSION AND THE BOY NAMED CROW IN MURAKAMI'S *KAFKA ON THE SHORE*

Michele Eduarda Brasil de Sá[1]
Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul

When I started reading *Kafka on the Shore*, that wise-sounding figure of the boy named Crow caught my attention from the very beginning, not only because it has an outstanding participation in the prologue (starting from its title, by the way), but also because it somehow points toward an end that we can see coming—even though there is a lot of mystery and many riddles in each chapter of the book—before we get there. In my first reading, it seemed very simple: the Crow was the protagonist's *alter ego*, following him on a journey. That journey was about becoming an adult, an internal view of the protagonist's growing pains. Tamura Kafka started as a fifteen-year-old full of doubts and deeply insecure, lacking his mother's love, and ended as "the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world." *Kafka on the Shore* may come off as just another *Bildungsroman*, but it is not by any means limited to such simplistic description.

My perception of Kafka and the boy named Crow was that they were both the same, but living in separate worlds—not so separate, for dreams and reality are not definitely limited in Murakami's novel. This identity Kafka-Crow was reinforced by the fact that the name *Kafka* means "jackdaw" in Czech, a species of bird in the family of crows (Wasihun, 1208). Different names, same meaning, same person. Reiko Abe Auestad, for example, says that Kafka "has presumably invented an imaginary friend," referring to the boy named Crow, "who functions as his inner guiding voice" (305). However, the boy named Crow behaves not like a boy, but like a counselor—or a kind of coach, reminding Kafka, from beginning to end, to be the toughest fifteen-year-old:

> "You have to overcome the fear and anger inside you," the boy named Crow says. "Let a bright light shine in and melt the coldness in your heart. That's what being tough is all about. Do that and you really *will* be the toughest fifteen-year-old on the planet. You following me? There's still time. You can still get your *self* back. Use your head. Think about what you've got to do. You're no dunce. You should be able to figure it out." (360)

[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5487-9557

The inevitability of the process has to be made clear to the young Kafka. He needs to accept his Oedipal fate and move away from his father's shadow—which means killing him, after all, and in many senses. And he is, of course, in quest of himself. But he doesn't find himself in the Crow: he finds himself in "a mirror, a reflection in the lyrics of Miss Saeki," completed by the painting he finds at the Komura Library (Hmar, 31). He's not looking for the Crow: they make the journey together. Betiel Wasihun points out the title of the prologue in Japanese (*karasu to yobareru shōnen*), explaining that this verbal use makes us understand that the boy was called "crow" by someone, for "the verb *yobu* (*yobareru*) is used for calling out to someone, or calling for someone, but not for saying someone 'is named Crow,' as in one's personal name" (1209).

REVISITING THE RIDDLE: THE WORDS FROM THE CROW

Different names, same meaning, same… person? I started wondering if I was reading it right. We can understand the expression *alter ego* as another self, and that was the interpretation I was grasping until then, but it can also mean someone who is very close, almost equal in acts and mind, someone comparable to one's best friend—someone who would die for you, if necessary. That was when the words of the boy named Crow started to sound a little different to me:

> Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside of you. So all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step. There's no sun there, no moon, no direction, no sense of time. Just fine white sand swirling up into the sky like pulverized bones. That's the kind of sandstorm you need to imagine. (5)

Tamura Kafka is the storm, the metamorphosis, the impetuous change, the whirlwind in his adolescence. How can his identity be defined? It's still under construction—a painful, sometimes sorrowful sequence of choices and uncertainties so far. This is the real inescapable fate. The words of the Crow sound like the speech of an old wise man, the voice of someone who has already been through that storm, knows what to do and knows what

comes after. The boy named Crow isn't really a boy, as Nakata Satoru (whose story is told in the even-numbered chapters, converging in the end with Kafka's story) is not really an elderly man. The Crow continues:

> And you really will have to make it through that violent, metaphysical, symbolic storm. No matter how metaphysical or symbolic it might be, make no mistake about it: it will cut through flesh like a thousand razor blades. People will bleed there, and you will bleed too. Hot, red blood. You'll catch that blood in your hands, your own blood and the blood of others.
>
> And once the storm is over you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about. (5–6)

At the end of the novel, the boy named Crow acknowledges that no one else could have done as well as Kafka did and that he has become indeed the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world (435). Reading these passages again, the identification between Kafka and the Crow raises another interpretation. Tamura Kafka is not talking to himself; he has an interlocutor, a very close one. Who could be so close as to be almost identified with him? He does not even meet Nakata Satoru in the novel, but if we read Nakata's path as a mirrored course along with Kafka's journey, we can assume they are on the same surface, but on opposite sides.

Some scholars understand Nakata and Kafka as being only one in two different levels; Komori Yōichi, for instance, identifies both as Oedipus (Amitrano, 100). The very fact that they are protagonists in connected stories told step by step, distributed in even and odd chapters, makes us aware of the probability of an intimate link between them. At his young age, Nakata had been a smart student, even though he did not have initiative and did not show much interest in classes. It is possible to know this from the testimony of Nakata's former teacher found in a letter she wrote (chapter 12). One day Nakata suffered an unexplained accident while he was on an excursion with his teacher and colleagues. Since then, he grew up with severe learning problems and became an adult with the innocent heart of a child.

Nakata's dislike for classes and school is reflected by the words of the boy named Crow in the following passage:

I always paid close attention to what was said in class, though.

> Just like the boy named Crow suggested.
>
> The facts and techniques or whatever they teach you in class isn't going to be very useful in the real world, that's for sure. Let's face it, teachers are basically a bunch of morons. But you've got to remember this: you're running away from home. You probably won't have any chance to go to school anymore, so like it or not you'd better absorb whatever you can while you've got the chance. Become like a sheet of blotting paper and soak it all in. Later on you can figure out what to keep and what to unload. (9)

In the same letter written where she talks about the mysterious event that changed Nakata's life, Nakata's former teacher writes that he seemed always unhappy and he probably had experienced domestic violence. She could tell that from the flashes of fear in his eyes, his involuntary flinches, and from her experience as a teacher, having dealt with children for a long time. Nakata himself tells Otsuka, the black cat, that his mother was always crying, because of his special condition after that mysterious incident, but his father never cried and was always angry (48). Could it be that Nakata had suffered in the hands of a violent father? He was from an upper-middle-class urban family (like Kafka), with educated parents, a characteristic emphasized by the teacher in the letter. Parental relations, especially concerning the relations father-son, are crucial to the plot.

In his own journey, when looking for a stray cat called Goma, Nakata kills Johnnie Walker, the cat killer. Nakata is attracted to Johnnie Walker's big house by a dog—the same dog that appears in the painting that Kafka finds at the Komura library—and finds out what Johnnie Walker does to cats. It is not Nakata's impetus that makes him assassinate Johnnie Walker; it's Johnnie Walker himself that convinces him to do it. What does it have to do with the point of parental relations? There is a connection, since Kafka's father, Koichi Tamura, is found dead after Nakata kills Johnnie Walker. Nakata used a kitchen knife to stab Johnnie Walker, who fell down and died. As written in the news (beginning of chapter 21), "Tamura was found facedown, nude, covered in blood […]. The weapon used was a knife from the kitchen discovered beside the body" (181). It seems that both Nakata and Kafka needed to overcome their father figures so that they could move ahead. Just one more comment on it before we proceed: Franz Kafka, the Czech writer so admired by young Tamura as for him to take his name, also had many problems with his own father, a feature that can be seen in most of his works (*The Metamorphosis*, *Letter to His Father*, to cite some).

THE CROW AS A MESSENGER AND HIS ROLE AS AN ACT OF TRANSMISSION

In her book entitled *Medium, Messenger, Transmission,* Sybille Krämer, after debating some examples of transmission in different contexts and fields, develops an idea of transmission based on four points, summarized as follows: (1) Transmissions presuppose a difference; (2) The role of the mediator might be to maintain this difference, and not necessarily to level it; (3) The function of the messenger is to make something perceptible; and (4) The self-neutralization of the messenger (165–166). I would like to reflect on the character of the boy named Crow as a messenger whose transmission is indispensable for bringing things together in the novel by closing up the entrance stone, as the character whose role "is to restore what's here now to the way it *should* be" (363).

First of all, Nakata and Kafka are deeply connected: they share similarities (as we have seen before when approaching the relationship each one had with their fathers), they can be read as mirrored characters, but they are not the same. The interpretation we are giving here is that the voice of the boy named Crow is not Kafka's inner voice, but Nakata's, from a different place. He is the one guiding Kafka throughout his journey. The presupposed difference, in this case, is that the characters belong to different worlds (or dimensions); the boy named Crow comes to Kafka's world once in a while and leaves when he wants. In the following passage he speaks through Kafka, but it remains clear when it is Kafka's words and when it is his:

> I try putting into words my impressions of the novel, but I need Crow's help—need him to show up from wherever he is, spread his wings wide, and search out the right words for me.
>
> "The main character's from a rich family," I say, "but he has an affair that goes sour and he gets depressed and runs away from home. While he's sort of wandering around, this shady character comes up to him and asks him to work in a mine, and he just tags along after him and finds himself working in the Ashio Mine. He's way down underground, going through all kinds of experiences he never could have imagined. This innocent rich boy finds himself crawling around in the dregs of society."
>
> I sip my milk and try to piece together the rest of what I want to say. It takes a while before Crow comes back, but Oshima waits

patiently. (98)

As for Krämer's second point, according to which "transmissions are a way of dealing with difference" (168), the messages from the boy named Crow do not make one character turn into the other. They are identified, but they do not amalgamate. In other words: for Nakata to do what he has to do and accomplish his mission, Tamura Kafka has to fulfill the prophecy.

It is also important to highlight that dreams and reality are two realms where things take place in this novel; transitioning from one to the other is also a form of dealing with difference. Between chapters 46 and 47, there is a chapter entitled "The boy named Crow." It is exactly the same title of what we called the prologue in this book. The difference is that in the prologue the boy named Crow talks to Tamura Kafka about the plans of escaping home; in the interchapter, the character named Crow appears clearly as a bird, attacking a man whose description resembles exactly the one of Johnnie Walker: a man with a silk hat, threatening to use a flute made of the souls of cats. Once again Johnnie Walker is attacked, but in a different place—in limbo. His laughter keeps resonating even after the Crow's attack, leaving the readers in doubt if he was finally killed once and for all, or not.

Krämer's third point is the most evident in *Kafka on the Shore*. What is a messenger for? His task is the transmission of a message. He has to bring it to the receptor's knowledge. There are many passages in the novel where the boy named Crow intervenes to give Kafka some advice or to clarify something. For instance:

> "It's not that your mother didn't love you," the boy named Crow says from behind me. "She loved you very deeply. The first thing you have to do is believe that. That's your starting point."
>
> "But she abandoned me. She disappeared, leaving me alone where I shouldn't be. I'm finally beginning to understand how much that hurt. How could she do that if she really loved me?"
>
> "That's the reality of it. It did happen," the boy named Crow says. "You were hurt badly, and those scars will be with you forever. I feel sorry for you, I really do. But think of it like this: It's not too late to recover. You're young, you're tough. You're adaptable. You can patch up your wounds, lift up your head, and move on. But for her that's not an option. The only thing she'll ever be is

> lost. It doesn't matter whether somebody judges this as good or bad—that's not the point. *You're* the one who has the advantage. You ought to consider that."
>
> I don't respond.
>
> "It all really happened, so you can't undo it," Crow tells me. "She shouldn't have abandoned you then, and you shouldn't have been abandoned. But things in the past are like a plate that's shattered to pieces. You can never put it back together like it was, right?"
>
> I nod. *You can never put it back together like it was.* He's hit the nail on the head. (371–372)

Passages like this and others (the one in which the boy named Crow rebukes Kafka for having raped Sakura in his dreams is another good example) are proof that Kafka and Crow cannot be just the same person. The boy named Crow, as we said before, does not sound like a boy. His speech evinces that he is someone with experience, and he possesses elaborate logical reasoning, as well as an attitude of mentoring and protecting. If we pay attention to the other side of the two-folded plot, the boy named Crow has the intelligence and the balance that are missing in post-trauma Nakata. Things have to be put back together in their places, even though they will never be the way they were before.

In addition, the boy named Crow is there to help Kafka, but Kafka cannot do anything in return. As a fifteen-year-old living through such an experience (or such experiences), he has nothing more than doubts, questions, and worries about his own future, together with his issues about the past.

The fourth point is based on the understanding that the messenger needs to be self-neutralized. It means that the messenger does not speak for himself, and the content of his message is therefore depersonalized. The novel ends with Tamura Kafka starting a new journey, heading back to Tokyo, and with a dialogue between Kafka and the boy named Crow:

> "Did I do the right thing?"
>
> "You did the right thing," the boy named Crow says. "You did what was best. No one else could have done as well as you did. After all, you're the genuine article: the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world."

> "But I still don't know anything about life," I protest.
>
> "Look at the painting," he says. "And listen to the wind."
>
> I nod.
>
> "I know you can do it."
>
> I nod again.
>
> "You'd better get some sleep," the boy named Crow says. "When you wake up, you'll be part of a brand-new world."
>
> You finally fall asleep. And when you wake up, it's true.
>
> You are part of a brand-new world." (436)

Whatever risks or difficulties Kafka had to face in his "sandstorm," they were not determined by the boy named Crow. They were part of a process, a matter of circumstances, and both Nakata and Kafka, not exactly knowing what they were supposed to do and why, had their roles in it. So, what is it that moves them, as well as the other characters? Kafka answers this question: "Fate seems to be taking me in some even stranger directions" (88). From this perspective, the boy named Crow functions as an agent of destiny. He is an instrument, a messenger, a medium—his part is to complete the necessary transmission so that fate can be sealed. His last words to Kafka concretize this sealing: "*'When you wake up, you'll be part of a brand-new world.' You finally fall asleep. And when you wake up, it's true. You are part of a brand-new world.*" The use of the second person here resembles the casting of a spell. The boy named Crow has the words, but he does not own the magic.

IT ENDS WHERE IT ENDS—OR WHERE IT STARTS

At the beginning of the novel, Tamura Kafka was preparing to leave his home in Tokyo; in the end, he prepares to go back, as in the end of a cycle, where beginning and end fuse at the same point. This new beginning is a brand-new world, in the words of Crow. Will the young Tamura still be called Kafka after crossing this line? Will there be a boy named Crow after that? Will there even be a boy? Fate is already complete—for now.

Wasihun writes that "the protagonist's self entails a double act of antonomasia: the other, the alter ego of the fictional self is called 'crow' by the actual fictional self, which in turn calls itself 'Kafka'" (1211). This coincidence of names leads to understanding that Kafka and the boy named Crow are the same. This essay attempted to reflect deeper on this sameness. We agree there is an identification between Kafka and Nakata and that it is built in a parallel narration. Since they do not even meet in the story, they interact by the means of a messenger: the boy named Crow. Maybe "interact" is not the best word to refer to the way they relate, since Kafka talks very often with the Crow, but Nakata only interacts plainly with cats. The boy named Crow seems to be the lost part of Nakata (taken away from him in the day he suffered that striking unexplained accident while outside the school with his teacher and group) reaching for Tamura Kafka, who is himself in search of something else, even though he does not know what it is.

Neither Kafka nor Nakata has confidence in knowing anything. They are, each one in their circumstances, marked by a feeling of immaturity and fear of the overwhelming world they are in. In spite of this, they are led by fate through unusual places and paths until they accomplish their individual missions that, while distinct, both belong to the same frame speaking properly and metaphorically. Both of the characters are part of the painting entitled "Kafka on the Shore," found at the Komura library. The role of the boy named Crow is the transmission of clues and directions that are necessary for Kafka to go where he must.

Employing the four points of Krämer's theory of transmission (transmissions presuppose a difference; the role of the mediator might not be to level this difference; the purpose of the messenger is to make something perceptible; and the self-neutralization of the messenger), I tried to reflect on the character of the boy named Crow as a messenger whose transmission is crucial to the plot. He binds the stories of both Nakata and Kafka, who act in different contexts, but without necessarily making them come together in one of the chapters or at the end of the book. If we even think about leveling the difference between them, it could be materialized only in the painting, where both are present. Anyway, this is not a prerequisite or a condition for us to consider the existence of a transmission. The purpose of the messenger (the boy named Crow) is clearly to make something perceptible: he teaches, conducts, and advises Kafka from the first to the last words of the novel. Despite the fact of being sometimes ominous and enigmatic, his words are uttered to shed some light on Kafka's darkness. The message is indeed independent of the

messenger, who does not have a will and is not engaged in deciding the reason of things, in whose charge is destiny.

In the end, mission accomplished. Tamura Kafka finally reaches the stage of "the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world." From dreams to reality, from Nakata to Tamura, from town to small library to log cabin in the woods to dark deep forest and back home, the fifteen-year-old does not get lost in the tracks in part because of the stability of the transmission, structured by fate. By the image of a boy named Crow, Nakata and Tamura grow up and overcome their problems with their own fathers/predecessors, which is something we all do at a certain level, for generational conflicts are also a matter of transmission. Even when one *can never put it back together like it was.*

REFERENCES

Amitrano, Giorgio. "Echoes of Ancient Greek Myths in Murakami Haruki's novels and in Other Works of Contemporary Japanese Literature." In: J. McConnell, & E. Hall (Eds.), *Ancient Greek myth in world fiction since 1989*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016. 91–103.

Auestad, Reiko Abe. "The problematic of border-crossing in Kafka on the Shore: between metaphor and reality." In I. Hijiya-Kirschnereit. *Essays in Honour of Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit on the Occasion of Her 60th Birthday*. München: Iudicium, 2008. 295–309.

Hmar, Rodi Lalrammawii. "Locating The 'Other Half': A Psychoanalytic Reading Of Haruki Murakami's Kafka On The Shore." *The Journal for English Language and Literary Studies* 5:2 (April/June 2015). Retrieved June 12, 2020, from http://www.tjells.com/article/580_Rodi%20Larammawii%20Hmar.pdf

Krämer, Sybille. *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*. Amsterdam University Press, 2015.

Murakami, Haruki. *Kafka on the Shore*. Trans. J. Philip Gabriel. New York, NY: Vintage, 2005.

Wasihun, Betiel. "The Name 'Kafka': Evocation and Resistance in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*." *MLN* 129:5 (2015): 1199–1216. Retrieved July 31, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/24463609