

Not Unlike Kafka

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Personally, I find *Poseidon* to be one of the most moving short stories Frank Kafka ever wrote. It functions in Frank Kafka's body of work pretty much the same way *eXistenZ* does in David Cronenberg's, or *Our Game* in John le Carre's, which is to say, it acts as a summation. If you read Kafka's *Poseidon* you'd be able to enter the game with enough in hand to get hold of most of what Kafka's getting at. And yet it is strangely lyrical, hauntingly beautiful, and only slightly less so when translated into English.

Poseidon tells the story of an inhuman diligence and attention to detail. Since the beginning of time and until the end of days Poseidon sits in a small room, making sure that his kingdom, the Oceans, run smoothly. The irony is that for all the balancing of his books, for all his eternal diligence, Poseidon has never seen the full extent and sheer beauty of his kingdom. Hopefully one day, in the last moments before Doomsday rolls out, he may be able to make a tour. But even then many splendors may have passed away, their time already expired. Yet day and night, Poseidon remains in his small, cramped room, working out the finest calculations for his kingdom.

Almost everything you need to know to access Kafka is present in this story. It shows the inhuman conditions that even the most diligent among us must labor under when faced with a system of power. It shows the utter alienation that we as human beings experience when we find ourselves captured by this system. And in very broad strokes

this story depicts the sheer magic of Frank Kafka – his ability to overturn any system of power and cage it within his own language. And there's something else; each story is a denouement and nothing more. The whole of the story is its own surprise-ending, just like in this tale Poseidon never having seen his kingdom is something we know from the very get-go.

If Ahmed Essop's recent collection of stories, *Narcissus and other stories*, were anything at all like the work of Frank Kafka, I'd have no choice but to say this up front. This however, is not directly the case.

Yet the similarities multiply. Both writers find themselves in a well-contained environment that becomes the stage for their stories. Both writers find themselves in the midst of sweeping political changes. And perhaps most importantly, both writers embody what Frank Miller longingly refers to as the 'small, personal, even autobiographical'. There are vast, global situations at play, but the access point is always the personal rather than the political.

It is exactly this refusal of the overarching, this commitment to the immediate, which allow Deleuze and Guattari to describe Kafka's work as a *minor literature*. Not that they mean by this, Kafka's work be relegated to the trash-heap of secondary literary merit. On the contrary, a *minor literature* is the wave of the future. A *minor literature* is like a virus or like an atom. It is something small which seeds itself into a preexistent framework of references, and completely alters that framework.

A minor literature is marked by signs: three of these always. The first is the mark of the dominant language. A minor literature always appears in the language that is most dominant. It is a language that has been forced upon speakers, it is the language of the oppressors, inflicted upon the oppressed. But the act of using the language is itself the opposite acquiescence to a monolithic power. Use of the dominant language is, if anything at all, a sign of defiance. It is a sign that the successors have arrived and that, evolutionarily speaking, things have finally gotten started. In one swift stroke, the dominant language becomes a contested space, rather than a power-constellation, ordering smaller worker-parts into maximized activity. It is a language that begins to escape Signification. Or at the very least one that begins to make the attempt.

Take, by way of example, the title story *Narcissus*. It follows exactly the same tactic as Kafka's *Poseidon*. Again we see a classical legend, this time of the beautiful boy whose reflection drove him to drown in a pool of water, reworked for a modern era. Again we see a beautiful son, again we see a death by drowning. But more than anything, it is Essop's simple, elegant language that allows us access to minds of the characters.

Like Kafka, Essop's writing is short hand for the human condition. "The women teachers felt like maids in her presence, and she had little to say to them. She preferred the company of male teachers, who would gather around her", writes Essop, and with one swift stroke we have accessed an entire constellation of social power. Nothing more needs be said because nothing more can be said. And in this way Essop becomes heir to the kind of immediacy that is present in writers like Isabel Allende and Charles Dickens.

If in South Africa, if inside the walls of academia, we find ourselves celebrating writers like JM Coetzee and Andre Brink, then Ahmed Essop seems to have eluded us. He is the hidden protagonist of African fiction. One who arises from the streets and the lives of the very ordinary masses. His quiet, deliberate manner has escaped almost unnoticed into the unfathomable night.