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Sovereign taxidermy: contesting ultimate decisions with Melville, Schmitt and Krasznahorkai

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ABSTRACT

The article reads texts by Herman Melville and László Krasznahorkai through the Schmittian problem of genuine sovereign decisions. Examining the capacity and authority of contested, depersonalized and feigned sovereignties, two key figures are highlighted: a veiled corpse that supplements a ship's figurehead in Melville's story, and the carcass of a dead whale in Krasznahorkai's novel. The two figures maintain a political sphere in which the protagonists contest and claim sovereignties of uncertain origin to subvert and restore order. It is argued that the emptied sovereignties are crucial to understanding how the pure capacity to act can become legitimate politics.

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1. Introduction

In Chapter 8 of Book 1 of the *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, Jean Bodin illustrates the absolute and perpetual nature of sovereignty by pointing out how ridiculous it would be to mistake delegated power for sovereignty:

if [...] the absolute power conceded to a lieutenant of the prince were called sovereignty, he would be able to use it against his prince, who would then be no more than a cipher, and the subject would then command his lord, and the servant his master, which would be absurd (Bodin 1992, p. 2).¹

Bodin gives us the opportunity to reflect on the political efficacy of contested and feigned sovereignty. A master who was thought to be the sovereign, but who is exposed as a fake precisely when the servant uses the delegated power against him, is a contested master. If contesting the master's sovereignty is successful, the sovereignty may simply have been feigned. The (former) prince turns out to be a cipher, a *zero* who appeared to be sovereign but only pretended to be one. He is not the *one* sovereign. Perhaps the fallen master was once the genuine sovereign, but the challenge has unmasked his supposed sovereignty in such a way that it is now probably impossible to trace it back to a moment when it was real.

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Bodin's concern with identifying genuine sovereignty has again become a question for practical politics and theory. Martin Loughlin (2016, p. 57) speaks of a 'remarkable proliferation' of adjectives – shared, multiple, mixed, and decentralized – that qualify sovereignty. Among other things, the flow of investment, information and crime or the loss of state control to non-state actors justifies investigations into the applicability and relevance of the fragmented concept of sovereignty (Kalmo and Skinner 2010, p. 1, Baranger 2010, pp. 48–50, Dyzenhaus 2015, p. 338). However, as Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner argue, a new research agenda could be set that does not aim at decoding the meaning and validity of the concept, but explores its use as an 'argumentative resource' (Kalmo and Skinner 2010, p. 9). One such use of the concept is the (re)claiming of sovereignty, the demand for 'taking back control' (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020) or the call for a reterritorialization of power (Kallis 2018), often with reference to the 'national interest' (Verzichelli 2020). The distinction between genuine and inauthentic sovereignty have become political again.

This article addresses the problem of contested, feigned and genuine sovereignty and its traceability to the position from which it originates. It will be argued that sovereignty can fulfill its role as the ultimate source of authoritative decisions despite its possibly contested, feigned or simply epistemologically uncertain character. Claiming sovereignty as an argumentative resource without demonstrating its unambiguous source is already a contestation in the mode of sovereignty. As will be shown, sovereignty necessarily remains contestable, and the loss of traceability is in fact an enabler of sovereignty rather than its limitation.

The article attempts a comparative reading of two novels, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* and László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*, to analyze cases that focus on the contestation of sovereignty when figures turn out to be 'ciphers' and where the traces of sovereignty lead back to uncertain origins. The novels are conceptually and philologically related to Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and to its broader realist framework. Schmitt's 'normative nothingness' (Schmitt 2005, pp. 31–32), from which the sovereign decision to maintain, suspend or restore an order comes, reinforces sovereignty as an action directed towards order, which as a mere capacity to act cannot be derived from anything else (cf. Kalmo 2010, p. 115). Sovereignty seems suspiciously self-validating in this respect; when it is capable to act and decide, it proves that it is sovereign. When it fails, there are no formal or normative criteria to confirm that it is the sovereign. In this respect, sovereignty can be effective as an argumentative resource and as a political good even through contestation, and perhaps even as feigned or without a traceable origin that could guarantee its genuineness.

First, I discuss the conceptual contestations of sovereignty and focus on an underlying realist controversy in Schmitt's thought. Second, I turn to the novels of Melville and Krasznahorkai to analyze their fictionalization of sovereignty. Rather than reading the texts as mere illustrations of the political theory of sovereignty, the novels, I argue, provide a concept of depersonalized sovereignty that paradoxically fits well with Schmitt's focus on the decision-making figure of the sovereign as an enabler of political action.

2. The uncertain political realism of sovereignty

It might be appropriate to begin the exposition of sovereignty as a contested concept with a look at Schmitt, as he unmasks an attempt to feign sovereignty. His attack on political romanticism, framed as an unfounded claim to sovereignty, reveals on the one hand his reduction of sovereignty to unconstrained factual might, while on the other hand, his approach leaves open a crucial question concerning the origins of the sovereign decision.

The elements of Schmitt's famous formula of sovereignty – Sovereign is he who decides on the exception – were initially conceived as a critical stance against depoliticization. In *Political Romanticism*, Schmitt addresses genuine political decisions as they are faked by romanticism. For Schmitt, romanticism is feigned sovereignty; it claims sovereignty and pretends to be active in a form-giving way, but with the same gesture with which it creates order, it undermines any real effect by retreating into the aesthetic. Romanticism seems to be a political movement, while it seems to forget or conceal that politics is about agency, effect and consequence. Thus, '[p]olitics is just as alien to [the political romantic] as ethics or logic' (Schmitt 1986, p. 146).

Schmitt's critique is directed against what he sees as the main pillars of the movement, namely the romantic subjectification of agency and the romantic mode of productivity. Romanticism claims the same sovereign relationship to the world as God, but 'the final authority is shifted from God to the genius of the "ego"' (Schmitt 1986, p. 18). What Schmitt calls 'subjective occasionalism' consists of a theological doctrine and its romantic modification. The romantic sees everything in the world as a mere occasion and opportunity for romantic productivity. However, this absolute creativity, the boundless transformation of the world, occurs through imagination and poeticization (Schmitt 1986, pp. 83–84). Romantic productivity is unrestricted because it claims to be omnipotent, but it is also restricted because it is only imaginary – even according to the romantics themselves, who thus invalidate responsibility. The essential contradiction is that romanticism 'wants to be productive without becoming active', however, 'political activity is not possible in this way' (Schmitt 1986, p. 159). The god-like sovereignty of romanticism seems to be ineffective in terms of genuine political activity due to its retreat into the realm of aesthetics: 'The will to reality ended in the will to appearance' (Schmitt 1986, p. 78). Nevertheless, the usual Schmittian ambiguity regarding the enemies of the political – romantics, liberals or the Buribunks (cf. Tranter and Bikundo 2022) – should not be forgotten; political romanticism cannot simply be dismissed as harmless. Feigned romantic sovereignty is either incapable of making the existential, form-giving decision on the enemy and political unity (and thus becomes incapable of dealing with crises), or it is 'an effective cloak over a particularly vicious kind of power politics' (Dyzenhaus 2015, p. 357) to conceal that romantic activity deliberately weakens the sovereign position. To be sure, the latter reading seems to ascribe a genuine political effect to Bodin's cipher, and as far as Schmitt's broader argument in his later works is concerned, this may well be the case.

Schmitt's critique of romanticism implies a reduction of the concept of sovereignty to factual might. Sovereignty is genuine only if it can ground effectual decisions as opposed to imaginary actions. However, this distinction leads to another within the concept of sovereignty, namely that between rightful authority (*potestas*) and de facto power and capacity (*potentia*), of which Schmitt seems to absolutize the latter.

Since Bodin, the classical and contemporary literature on sovereignty has focused on the question of how to reconcile the necessity of an ultimate decision-maker with standards that enable the normative justification of sovereign actions even though the sovereign is the supreme power. The reduction of sovereignty to only one of its aspects leads to an unjustified claim to sovereignty, that is, to another dimension of fake sovereignty. For Charles H. McIlwain, collapsing de facto and de jure power, subordinating the latter to the former, even calls into question the very boundaries of politics itself: '[m]ight will be taken as right only in the lowest forms of political life' (McIlwain 1926, p. 254). The question is how to locate this lowest form of politics to distinguish real from feigned sovereignty.

According to Martin Loughlin, reducing the concept to one of its two key components, *potentia* or *potestas*, is a form of 'erosion' and loss of genuine sovereignty. Although this distinction was already present in the first systematic formulations of the concept (see Tuck 2015), political scholarship tends to mistake government capacities for sovereignty as such. In a similarly reductive reading, 'normativists' forget that norms do not act on their own, but require political authority (Loughlin 2016, pp. 63–64). Although sovereignty is a legal concept and its decisions take a juristic form, it is the representation of the autonomy of the political realm, and it expresses 'the absolute authority of that domain' (Loughlin 2016, p. 60). As Loughlin notes elsewhere, in modern states 'the rise of *potentia*', the 'actual ability to control the disposition of things', has become increasingly important as output legitimacy: the effectiveness of governments' performance outweighs input legitimacy, understood as *potestas* (Loughlin 2010, pp. 407–408).²

Schmitt's sovereign is famously personalized and decisionist and it not only reduces *potestas* to *potentia*, but also turns the justification of genuine decisions on its head: decisions are not to be derived from a pre-existing norm, but genuine sovereignty can be recognized by attributing normative force to a decision (Schmitt 2005, pp. 31–32). Schmitt's sovereign – as it is evident from his works on dictatorship and political theology – seems to be self-validating. The concept excludes traceability to a pre-existing and independent measure and thus offers no – external – criteria by which genuine and feigned sovereignty could be distinguished. Samuel Weber, who exposes the contradictions between Schmitt's concept of sovereignty and Walter Benjamin's misreading of Schmitt, rightly notes that the decision on the exception (which is the paradigmatic unsubstantiated decision) and the necessity of such a decision cannot be definitively eliminated (Weber 1992, p. 10). Since it limits its own necessity, there is no point from which it can be considered concluded. The sovereign decision is undetermined and open in its origins, and to preserve sovereignty, it must remain so.

A realist reading of the concept of sovereignty must, therefore, not only deal with either the external or the internal normativity of the purely political domain of sovereign decisions. At the same time, it is equally important to consider the epistemic conditions that overlap the distinction between *potestas* and *potentia*. That is, before a justification is attempted, incapacities of a seemingly genuine sovereignty and effective outcomes of feigned sovereignty must be considered. Perhaps Schmitt was right in rejecting fictionalized romantic sovereignty, but only if he was not deceived by a tactic of dissimulation that blurred the distinction between sovereign and cipher. This is the genuinely realist problem, which – supplementing but also in contrast to Schmitt – is to be explained with the help of Melville's Benito Cereno and Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*.

3. Veiled sovereignties in Benito Cereno

Herman Melville's story is about an encounter between two ships and their captains, the American Amasa Delano and the Spaniard Benito Cereno. When the American captain notices the *San Dominick*, a ship in trouble, apparently off course, flying no flag and having lost many of its crew, he decides to board the ship and offer his help. Observing the situation on the *San Dominick*, Captain Delano is puzzled as the ship appears to lack real management, and the weakened Captain Cereno offers no clear explanation for the problems. Suspiciously for the American, Benito Cereno relies on his slave Babo to support and even guide him, but he cannot make sense of their conversations. The American captain realizes that the ship is not being run properly, but he does not understand the relationship between Benito Cereno and Babo, crew and the slaves. He does not realize that the ship has been taken over by the revolting slaves, who have forced Benito Cereno to pretend to be the captain in case they come across another ship. Benito Cereno demonstrates a complex of inabilities in terms of political agency and sovereignty that remains hidden and concealed throughout most of the story. On the surface, the story is about a Spanish captain who is forced by the revolting slaves to maintain his position as a façade. In Melville's story, the hostage captain Benito Cereno, the leader of the slave revolt Babo and the intervening American captain Amasa Delano are all caught up in a Schmittian concrete situation. The latter in particular is seriously misguided about where genuine sovereignty lies, and so he proves to be deceived regarding his own sovereignty as well. Schmitt's attention in Melville's story was caught by the situation of the hijacked ship and its captain taken hostage, but in a broader context the problems point to the meaning of sovereignty.

The German translation of Melville's *Benito Cereno* was published in the same year as Schmitt's *Leviathan* (Tielke 2007, p. 99). From the late 1930s onwards, the American author became a frequent topic in Schmitt's correspondence, especially with Ernst Jünger. A letter from 1943 confirms that there was a long-running dispute between them concerning the merits of Melville, whom Jünger considered less significant than Poe, claiming that what Poe viewed in an individualistic way, Melville saw as political and social (Jünger and Schmitt 2012, p. 161, cf. p. 127). Schmitt countered that Poe was merely anecdotal compared to Melville's power to the objective, elemental and concrete situation (Jünger and Schmitt 2012, p. 121). Previously, Schmitt had claimed that he was overwhelmed by the unintentional and underlying symbolism of the situation in Melville's *Benito Cereno* (Jünger and Schmitt 2012, p. 115).

The situation to which Schmitt alludes is that of a hostage. It is known that Schmitt used his 1938 book on Hobbes and the protection-obligation formula to explain his own fall from grace under the Nazi regime and the attacks of the SS (Tielke 2007, p. 104, Maschke and Schmitt 2015, pp. 186–193). Schmitt frequently compared himself – in letters, in a proposed new introduction to his *Leviathan*, and in the post-war *Ex Captivitate Salus* – to Benito Cereno. By identifying himself with the deposed captain, Schmitt implies that he too has been hijacked (by the Nazi regime, by the masses as opposed to the European elite – cf. Beebe 2006, p. 122, Bikundo 2018, p. 8). The nodal point of these references is a letter to Jünger from June 1945, fictitiously pre-dated to the year of the publication of his book on Hobbes and signed (not for the first time) as Benito Cereno. The

letter is a warning to readers of Hobbes' *Leviathan* that they are risking their own lives by exploring the book's arcana and should, therefore, refrain from reading it (Jünger and Schmitt 2012; cf., pp.192–193, Beebe 2006, pp. 120–121). Schmitt implies the painful experience of being exposed to the political, of being subjected to its uncontrollable power and even being silenced by it (Schmitt 2017, pp. 60–61). Either as a response to his personal circumstances or as a theoretical account, Schmitt's question in the book about Hobbes is concerning the supposed mythical powers of the *Leviathan* symbol and the resulting questionable sovereignty. Both the success and the implied failure of the Hobbesian sovereign follow from a double dissimulation based on the separation of the internal and external, of acceptance and obedience. While the subjects acted as if they really believed what the sovereign commanded in terms of confession, the sovereign acted as if the possibility of public dissimulation did not exist. As a result, Schmitt writes, '[p]ublic power and force may be ever so completely and emphatically recognized and ever so loyally respected, but only as a public and only an external power, it is hollow and already dead from within. Such an earthly god has only the appearance and the simulacra of divinity on his side' (Schmitt 1996, p. 62). The *Leviathan* was internally emptied and destroyed, while – precisely as a result – retaining its external sovereignty. The emptied symbol of the *Leviathan* was able to fulfill its role as sovereign precisely because it fictionalized the origins of its own abilities.

In this regard, the *Benito Cereno* seems to be an easily decipherable allegory of contested and feigned sovereignty. The novel confirms that, precisely because unconditional, underived authority is in question, subject to appearance and unintended symbolism, it remains overwhelming – not as personalized sovereignty, but as fictionalized sovereign power. It needs to be addressed how feigned sovereignty fills emptied spaces, either by its absence or by being present but subject to contestation.

As Lawrie Balfour points out, the situation is grounded in visual relationships, which include the 'myopic American captain', the eventually beheaded Babo, whose dead gaze was directed at his former owner, and the author of the story, who 'hides the meaning of events from the reader's view' by the muddled perspectives, the 'repeated reference to shadows, grayness, and specters' (Balfour 2013, pp. 262, 264–265). Harmon Siegel notes that Melville is the true sovereign of the story, as he is the author of the mythic meta-image that conveys the genuine visible truth and introduces a Schmittian political dimension (Siegel 2019, p. 64). Supposing such an omnipotent external position, however, should not be translated into a god-like sovereignty, even if Schmitt notes that the ship was not only in a fabulous situation, but also in a fateful one ('*Fabelhafte, Fatumhafte? Situation*' Jünger and Schmitt 2012, p. 159). Rather, it should be understood as an external structural condition that is internally inscribed in the situation to maintain it through sovereignty, but also to keep it open to potential interventions. Sovereignty here is less a concrete agent than the trace of a previous action that may be deactivated and 'slumbering' (cf. Balfour 2013, p. 263), but which could break out and reshape the situation and its previously determined perspectives.

Sovereignty is always present in Melville's story, even if it is hidden and contested at the same time. The key to the situation is offered to Captain Delano the very first time he approaches the *San Dominick*. The relationships of feigned sovereignties are

simultaneously revealed and concealed as the representations of authority on the ship unfold:

Whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not quite certain, owing to a canvas wrapped about that part, either to protect it while undergoing a re-furbishing, or else decently to hide its decay. Rudely painted or chalked, as in a sailor freak, along the forward side of a sort of pedestal below the canvas, was the sentence, 'Seguid vuestro jefe', (follow your leader). (Melville 2016, p. 58)

It is not sovereignty itself that has been veiled, but it is implied that genuine sovereignty is not available for direct representation and that the authorities on the ship may not be what they appear to be. Of course, when the American meets his Spanish colleague and the slave who is always in his company, he has no idea of their true relationship. But as Tracy B. Strong notes, despite his delusions about who the leader on the ship is, he clearly understands that the leadership is somehow weakened (Strong 2013, p. 296). Captain Delano even seems to despise Captain Cereno, who he believes is masking his incompetence, that his 'obvious debility', reticent behavior and his 'slumbering dominion' is not a calculated move, but simply weak leadership by an impostor (Melville 2016, pp. 61, 63, 76). It occurs to the American that the situation is somehow staged and that the master and slave are acting, but since he does not recognize the purpose of the scene, Captain Delano remains deceived. Although the captain must act in a political situation, his inability to recognize the friend-foe relationships means that he also fails to understand his own position (Siegel 2019, p. 61), which denies him the genuine sovereignty he seemed sure of. Even when Captain Cereno decides that he no longer wants to feign authority under Babo's guidance and tries to flee the ship, Captain Delano misunderstands the Spaniard's intentions and sees his escape as an attack against him. From the American's point of view, the situation unfolds only gradually and in fragments that do not come together to form a whole, which indicates that one can never fully know the positions within the situation. Perhaps, as Schmitt warned Hobbes' readers, the veil can only be lifted at a fatally high cost. Now that the situation has become critical and the seemingly entrenched positions have been violently unhinged, the perspectives have shifted abruptly:

... the cable of the San Dominick had been cut; and the fag-end, in lashing out, whipped away the canvas shroud about the beak, suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round towards the open ocean, death for the figure-head, in a human skeleton. (Melville 2016, p. 116)

The skeleton belonged to Captain Cereno's friend Don Alexandro Aranda, the owner of the slaves, who was killed early during the revolt and whose body was placed in the place of the original figurehead. Before he was beheaded, implicitly echoing Schmitt's warning of the risks, Babo's final sovereign act was to reveal the identity of the skeleton and, by extension, the identity of the captured ship. Although it seems that all staged appearances have been revealed at this point, it is by no means a shift from feigned to genuine sovereignty.

The American captain's ignorance betrayed his own sovereignty and deprived him of his autonomous capacity to act. What seemed to be superiority over a disorderly Spanish ship turned out to be a staged illusion. The feigned sovereignty, which he does not recognize, means that Captain Delano's own sovereignty is also imaginary. This is

confirmed by Captain Cereno's words about how he saved the lives of both by playing his part in the performance. After the revolt is put down, his hijacked counterpart, Captain Cereno, reflects on his own 'malign machinations and deceptions' aimed at saving the American's life and that Delano was 'in time undeceived' (Melville 2016, p. 136). Consequently, not only does Delano's sovereignty melt away in retrospect, but the hijacked captain also attempts to reclaim at least some measure of sovereignty by introducing a new thread (regarding their own safety) into the earlier situation. By deliberately feigning sovereignty on his own but captured ship, the despised Benito Cereno regained some of his lost sovereignty by providing protection to some of his fellows. Babo, on the other hand, appeared to be in command of a ship that was unfortunately disabled and lost its course; strictly speaking, the ship was not commanded. It is also worth noting that, as Strong points out, Babo was a slave in his own country even before he was forced onto the ship, while Atufal, who remained in chains all the time because he refused to ask the hostage Captain Cereno's pardon, was king in his own country (Strong 2013, p. 288). It is, therefore, conceivable that Captain Cereno was feigning his leadership and following Babo's orders, but the latter was also feigning his sovereignty (hidden from Captain Delano) under the orders of his former king, who refused to say a word and seemed to remain a slave and hide his sovereignty despite the successful revolt. At the top of these entangled threads and beyond the real or assumed roles, sovereignty remains active and effective, even as imaginary. From the subjects' point of view, the claiming, recognition or even misrecognition of sovereignty can contribute to either maintaining or reshaping the situation. It is about the activated structural conditions within a situation (like the canvas that hides the absence of a genuine figurehead) that influence the actors' behavior without being derived from a concrete, uncontested and unambiguous position that exists independently of the situation itself.

With these insights in mind, I turn to a key figure in the discourse on sovereignty, the whale, the giant sea monster that preoccupies Melville, Hobbes and Schmitt, to see how even as a carcass it is capable of engaging in multiple levels of sovereign action.

4. Emptied and stuffed sovereignty in *The Melancholy of Resistance*

Speaking of taxidermic whales and sovereignty, it seems appropriate to briefly consider Melville's *Moby Dick* before discussing Krasznahorkai's novel. Like the relationships in Benito Cereno, the feigned and contested sovereignties, the leadership at sea, the hunted whale and the sea itself all seem to be entangled in a web of mutually determined but also undermined positions in *Moby Dick*. The captain's sovereignty over the ship seems indisputable, for Ahab's personal authority goes far beyond his official position. He is a dictator and supreme leader not only over his seaman but also over the creatures of the sea. Ahab is not merely a hunter, but 'a great lord of Leviathans' (Melville 2017, p. 133). At the same time, the whale also exercises authority over the seamen as the animal 'leads' them out to sea to occupy its zones as Schmitt describes the relationship between whale hunting and the appropriation of the seas (Schmitt 2015, p. 30). As a contestation of sovereignty, *Moby Dick* challenges Ahab, even though he is supposedly the master of the entire species. The epistemological certainty of these contested sovereignties may also be limited. For a long time during the voyage, Ahab's presence and authority were felt more

than experienced. His mates ‘seemed to be the only commanders of the ship’, while the captain remained ‘unseen by any eyes’ yet apparently determined the order (Melville 2017, p. 126) – invoking Bodin’s cipher and resembling the position of Schmitt’s sovereign, who – less than a person as a structural condition – is both internal and external to the resulting order. Whaling, like any questioning of sovereignty, can be extremely dangerous: ‘[i]t seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan’, writes Melville (2017, p. 273), foreshadowing Schmitt’s warning concerning Hobbes’ book, but also foreshadowing the complex imaginary sovereignty in László Krasznahorkai’s novels.

In his *The Manhattan Project* (Krasznahorkai 2017), Krasznahorkai documents how often he came across Melville’s footsteps in New York while preparing his next novel, – *Spadework for a Palace* (Krasznahorkai 2022). It is about a librarian in New York City named Herman Melvill (sic!) who gradually discovers his relationship with the great author as he pursues his project of a perfect and absolute library that will remain forever closed to readers. In the documentary *The Manhattan Project*, Krasznahorkai tells readers how he was mistaken for an expert on whales and cetology, or Melville, because of his earlier novel *The Melancholy of Resistance*, in which a disemboweled whale plays a key role. The silent yet active presence of the dead whale can be unpacked by focusing on the problems of the complex relationships between contested and feigned sovereignties as they appear in *The Melancholy of Resistance*.

The plot of the novel is as follows. In a cold and foggy rural town, it is generally sensed that something menacing is approaching. The nature of the threat remains unclear for a while, but the tension is obvious. Before anything would happen, the shops close, public services are shut down and the streets become empty. Rumors spread that some of the nearby towns have been ravaged by a mob. Eventually, a circus arrives in the town whose main attraction is the body of a dead whale being transported on a huge truck. The spectacle attracts the locals, but they are outnumbered by the mob, which is now also present in the town. The circus is run by the Director, but a mysterious and bodily deformed person, the Prince, is also part of the company. One of the protagonists, a resident of the town, János Valuska, is mesmerized by the sight of the whale and tries to convince his old friend (of whom he is a caretaker) of the significance of the wondrous creature in the midst of the erupting chaos. However, the old man, György Eszter, a former music teacher, is interested neither in the whale nor in the violent events on the streets. All he is interested in is his musicological research about natural harmony. His estranged and separated wife Tünde Eszter, an ambitious member of the community’s civic life, witnesses the chaos and assumes a role in mobilizing the formal and informal authorities in the town, including even her husband. Eventually, the town was ravaged by the mob, but the uprising was put down by the military called into the town by Mrs. Eszter. As a result, the Director was deported, the Prince disappeared, Valuska was committed to a mental hospital, Mr. Eszter retired to his room and the whale was ‘removed’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 294). After order is restored, Mrs. Eszter formally becomes the leader of the town, but as the reader learns, she has actively manipulated events to her own advantage to pave her way to power.

Just as in Benito Cereno, the reader encounters a multitude of sovereign or at least seemingly sovereign positions which overlap and collide directly with one another. To begin with, the Leviathan of the story, the carcass is both a sovereign and

a supplementary sovereign. As a whale that could be compared to the key figures of Hobbes, Melville or Schmitt, it is obviously nothing more than a false sovereign, for the simple reason that it is dead. Nevertheless, its enormous measures are threatening enough to cause fear, not to mention the worrying news from the neighboring cities where it was previously staged (Krasznahorkai 2002, pp. 48, 66). For Valuska, who naively believes in celestial harmony and its attainability on earth, the whale could even be an enabler of reconciliation and unity, for it is

something worth seeing then, something worth discovering since he [Mr. Eszter] would then be granted a vision of that incorruptible order, under whose aegis a boundless and beautiful power comprehended in one harmonious whole the dry land and the sea. (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 97)

Later, however, Valuska admits that he too has become a victim of the fears spreading through the town (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 143), which he had previously understood as a fear of the unknown which would dissolve as soon as one directly encounters the miracle of the whale.

The question arises as to whether the carcass, to which the townsfolk are quick to ascribe a symbolic meaning, is capable of exerting any effect on a collapsing community. Krasznahorkai's novel seems to be an ironic inversion of Hobbes's framework by making the carcass effective, thus refuting Schmitt's laments about a deflated symbol replacing an actual sovereign. One could also argue that the symbol is all too perfect in a Hobbesian sense, for through the chaos and fear caused by the whale, it achieves a combination of the state of nature and the figure of Leviathan.³ However, it is precisely the emptied symbol, the almost humiliated ('he simply couldn't imagine what such an enormous creature might be stuffed with, though it was likely to be wood-shavings' Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 87) and feigned sovereignty of the dead body that structures the events. In this respect, the body of the dead whale in the dimly lit truck resembles the shrouded skeleton that substituted the figurehead of the San Dominick. The people, too, were similarly confused or perhaps even directly misguided:

... one moment it was the star item itself that was the most frightening (they had seen it!), the next it seemed to be merely a diversion from the rise of some kind of mob that was only waiting for night to fall before attacking the peaceful populace; one moment the whale had nothing to do with it, the next it was the cause of all the trouble. (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 137)

It is by no means certain that the whale is behind the events. 'See how much trouble you've caused, even though you've long been unable to harm anyone' (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 155) – says the frightened but still hopeful Valuska, who has been assigned by the quickly formed 'crisis committee' to gather information among the people crowding around the whale.

The whale could have been a mere instrument, for there were other actors who claimed authority over each other and over the events. First, the Director was not only the owner of the whale (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 146), a lord of the monster, just as Ahab was sovereign over all whales, but he also claimed to be the master of the mysterious and deliberately concealed Prince, a fellow member of the troupe (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 157). The two even argue in the back of the truck while Valuska overhears them. During the dispute, the Prince refers to his extraordinary

powers over the violent followers in the square and rejects the ‘superior authority’ of the Director (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 155). Later, the ‘apparently omnipotent director’ exposes the Prince’s revolt and reveals that the title was invented and bestowed by him ‘as a business decision’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 157). The Director, who is called to account by the authorities after the suppression of the uprising, denies his control of the events, but partially acknowledges his involvement by claiming his role behind the Prince. According to his defense, everything from the Prince’s ‘inflammatory rhetoric’ to the main attraction, the whale, was pure show: ‘Every item on the bill, was merely a front, was patently false’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, pp. 272–273). It should not be forgotten, however, that the Prince claimed to possess extraordinary – ‘magnetic’ – powers over the crowd, and the whale was seen as an otherworldly creature, a ‘spellbinding monstrosity’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 133), suggesting that neither the Director nor the authorities were fully aware of and in control of the potentially delusive situation. Moreover, there was at least one other position from which sovereignty was contested, namely that of Mrs. Eszter, who plotted the whole situation: ‘she should do with the town whatever (she almost said, “whatever she wanted”) ...’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, pp. 285–286). In this respect, she is the only one who at least resembles a genuine sovereign – more precisely, a Schmittian dictator who is supposed to restore order – who wants to find a way out of a situation that comes so close to civil war. None of these, however, means that sovereignty is ever uncontested or that all feigned sovereignties can be exposed.

The Melancholy of Resistance, like *Benito Cereno*, is a narrative about the disruption and the attempt to restore order. Both stories revolve around contested and feigned sovereignties – actual persons, lifeless entities, and symbols. The differences are noteworthy though. *Benito Cereno* tells the story of the actual restoration of the old order after the revolt in a judicial process. Conversely, Krasznahorkai’s narrative exemplifies a sovereign dictatorship in Schmitt’s sense, which aims to establish a new order without strictly adhering to pre-existing normative standards. Moreover, the dictator not only eliminated the disorder but also initiated it. In the first part of the novel, entitled *An Emergency* (literally translated, the Hungarian original means ‘States of emergency’), not only are the coming of the sea monster and the collapse described as inevitable, but Mrs. Eszter sees herself as the agent of the ‘unavoidable resurrection’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 46). In contrast to *Benito Cereno*, in Krasznahorkai both the abolition and the restoration of order seem to follow a plotted pattern, and this pattern refers not to an attainable unity but to the necessarily uncertain and contestable nature of any sovereignty. Even if the Prince was merely an instrument, like the whale, he not only contributed to the establishment of Mrs. Eszter’s rule but also foreshadowed the possibility or even the inevitability of its collapse.

Krasznahorkai’s story has another important trait, namely the politically relevant interplay of private and public relationships. A private issue – a marital conflict – suddenly unfolds at the end of Krasznahorkai’s novel. Although the readers of the novel already know at the beginning that Mr. and Mrs. Eszter live separately and that Mr. Eszter and Valuska live in the couple’s house, as well as that Mrs. Eszter still does her husband’s laundry, there are only hints about the political relevance of their conflict up to the point when Mrs. Eszter’s triumph is already unquestionable. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Eszter’s inner monologue reveals the underlying conflict:

... this the force you triumphed over?' Over this dummy, this fool, this 'creaking wreck' who, through his loyalty to that half-wit, had reduced himself to a mere shadow! Because that's all he was, thought Mrs Eszter as she heard him shuffle down the hall, a feeble shadow of even his former self, a pitiful geriatric, a terrified rabbit, 'a trembling old ratbag, whose eyes are always watering', who, instead of shaking off the shackles of the very memory of Valuska, had got himself so wrapped up in his 'fatherly' feelings that he had forfeited the utterly incomprehensible respect in which he had been held and was now suddenly regarded as 'a subject of general ridicule'. (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 298)

While Valuska is locked up in a mental hospital and Mr. Eszter withdraws into the company of his music theory books and tunes his piano, Mrs. Eszter seems to be achieving something that is both private and public at the same time. She punished her husband for personal and marital reasons, but also intervened politically when she recognized and criticized the waning of Mr. Eszter's authority. As a former teacher and pillar of the community, Mr. Eszter retained fragments of his former authority even during the crisis, when he reluctantly took on a minor role in an ad hoc committee whose members recognized him as 'the 'immediate master of the situation' (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 135). Perhaps Mrs. Eszter did not recognize these fragments, but the lack of authority and plotted the events to achieve both a marital and a public triumph. This interplay between the private and the public is what Giorgio Agamben has described as a condition of stasis, of civil war, which 'takes place neither in the oikos nor in the polis, neither in the family nor in the city; rather, it constitutes a zone of indifference between the unpolitical space of the family and the political space of the city' (Agamben 2015, p. 16). Perhaps even the mob was the instrument and consequence of this interplay between the private and the public. Although Agamben concludes that the oikos is thereby politicized while the polis is economized, we might add that this in-between is precisely the place where a sovereign enters to decide whether to abolish, maintain, restore, or completely reinstall order. But it is also the place where sovereignty is contested, feigned, concealed and revealed, undermined or reinforced, as was the case with the whale, the Director, the Prince and Mrs. Eszter.

Let us conclude this section by focusing on the position of Mr. Eszter, who seems to have no claim to sovereignty, much like Babo in Melville's novel. Michael J. Shapiro describes Mr. Eszter as a Hobbesian skeptic who 'embraces no harmony-providing solutions, either musical or political, having discovered (contra Andreas Werckmeister) that there are no tuning solutions because there are no natural harmonies' (Shapiro 2017, p. 13). When Mr. Eszter witnesses the collapse, he gives up hope of restoring order and begins, with little success, to turn his house into a fortress that symbolizes 'a retreat to a point of inner security, if only because the world outside had become a place of agonizing decay' (Krasznahorkai 2002, pp. 186–187). Shapiro rightly notes that no peaceful order seems to be emerging at this point. However, Mrs. Eszter's rule also implies Hobbesian currents, albeit more in terms of sovereignty understood as *potentia*, since her rule seems to be legitimized by the pattern of effective protection and obligation emphasized by Schmitt. At least the husband was able to maintain the separation of the internal and external spheres and stick to an agreement with his wife and thus also with the town. Furthermore, Mr. Eszter's musicological studies, his 'moment of anti-musical enlightenment' (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 112) lead to the insight that no tuning and no harmony can be natural, as it is always conventional, which could be related either to

a Hobbesian contract or even to the reduced Schmittian formula of protection and obligation.

Finally, Mr. Eszter is the only protagonist of the story who, by retreating into the internal, assumes a reflexive position which, although not completely detached, offers him a perspective from which all the sovereign claims described above seem to be feigned. As a parable for his unsuccessful use of the hammer while fortifying his house, he concludes that ‘it was not we who controlled the process, it controlled us, this process that did nothing to disturb the appearance of our controlling it’ (Krasznahorkai 2002, p. 183). On the one hand, Mr. Eszter’s perspective assumes that there is a structural condition, such as that of the veiled skeleton on Benito Cereno’s ship or the seemingly incapable whale in the town, which gives rise to all claims of sovereignty – even if Mrs. Eszter, for example, believes that it was she who let events take their course. On the other hand, Mr. Eszter’s parable compares him less with Hobbes than with Schmitt, who identifies himself with Benito Cereno, who became hostage to his own feigned sovereignty. Mr. Eszter, like Schmitt, found himself overwhelmed, both personally and conceptually, by a situation that he could comprehend, perhaps even acknowledge and appreciate, but could not control and hold on to. Mr. Eszter proves to be the only agent who has a perspective on a situation in which there is no personified sovereign, but that does not mean that he is able to fill the void made apparent by the contestation and the revealed uncertainty regarding sovereignty. All he is able to do is to reveal, perhaps not intentionally, that the canvas over the symbolic figurehead and the truck carrying the carcass of the whale, in the absence of an origin or a higher and external standard, conceals nothing more than the blurred distinction between feigned and genuine claims to sovereignty.

5. Conclusion

Having seen how sovereignty has been contested in some Schmittian concrete situations, should we conclude that the sovereign is the one who can feign sovereignty? Is sovereignty necessarily feigned? If we take Schmitt’s original formula seriously, we would only be repeating his tautology. For if sovereignty is reduced to mere potentia, the sovereign is the one who can ensure the conditions for underived political capacity to act. Certainly, sovereignty in this respect can only be traced back to a normative nothingness, precisely because it is the only origin that allows such unconditional actions. According to this reading, Schmitt’s sovereignty is reductive and undermines itself by locating genuine political decisions beyond the political domain, where potentia would require legitimization, even if not in terms of morality. However, if one turns to the novels of Melville and Krasznahorkai, a different interpretation becomes possible.

As can be seen in both novels, the chain of contested sovereignties leads back to an indeterminate, strictly speaking unrecognizable or even imaginary position of which one cannot decide whether it is capable of act. At the same time, however, these depersonalized figures – the veiled corpse as a supplementary figure head and the stuffed whale – not merely contributed to the protagonists’ capacity to act, but also to the formation and contestation of their claims to sovereignty. I have referred to these positions as structural conditions, which does not mean that they determine the role, thoughts and actions of the agents, but that they are points at which contestation can primarily arise. They are

simultaneously internal and external to the concrete situations, just as the sovereign is both inside and outside of the order derived from its decision.

However, neither the veiled corpse on the ship nor the carcass of the whale make decisions. In this respect, they are not personified sovereigns in the Schmittian sense. But as sources of sovereignty, or more precisely, as origins of contested sovereignties, they exercise control over situations, as Mr. Eszter concluded. In the novels, these depersonalized figures represent the normative nothingness that stands behind sovereignty in Schmitt, but only as an enabler that allows it to emerge without it being derived from a transpolitical measure. They prevent both the dissolution of sovereignty and its depoliticized closure. Sovereignty reveals itself as a liminal concept in which the epistemological value (the recognition of sovereignty) and the political value (the ability to make genuine political decisions) coincide. The veiled corpse and the dead whale as conditions of possibility do not determine sovereign action according to a pre-existing set of norms, but make it possible for it to function, but also for it to be called into question. In this respect, sovereignty is always feigned, self-confirming and self-justifying but nevertheless political, which means that it requires a minimal level of legitimation. With McIlwain, one could say that this is really the lowest form of politics. Yet it is still politics in the state of exception, in which sovereign decisions emerge and arbitrarily redraw the boundaries of political agency. Emerging from normative nothingness, sovereign decisions are reduced to *potentia*, but because of their contested and feigned nature, they are at the same time claims to genuine – justified – sovereignty.

Notes

1. I quote the abridged version translated by Julian H. Franklin. In his 1606 translation Richard Knolles also renders Bodin's French 'chifre' as 'cipher'.
2. A similar dualistic understanding guides David Dyzenhaus' work on Hermann Heller's theory of the state, which is based on the tension between *de facto* and *de jure* sovereignty. In contrast to Kelsen, Heller claims that sovereignty transcends positive law in that it can legally act against existing law, but at the same time, and in contrast to Schmitt, he sees sovereignty not in a particular state organ, but in the state as a whole (Dyzenhaus 2015, p. 355). Moreover, for Heller, a claim to sovereignty involves a justification that is always particular and political. That is, sovereignty goes beyond mere capacity and might by offering justification not in the name of an abstract and universal ideal, but by accepting a relationship of reciprocity with the individuals who are directly affected subjects of sovereign power (Dyzenhaus 2015, p. 362). This twofold justification allows Dyzenhaus to link Heller's concept of sovereignty to Bernard Williams' Basic Legitimation Demand which has been widely read as an example of political normativity, i.e. of a politics that is not devoid of normativity, but also not subject to and eliminated by abstract morality (Dyzenhaus 2015, p. 361, see also Williams 2005, Sleat 2014, Szűcs 2018, Jubb 2019, Sleat 2021). This, again, presents Schmitt as a *de facto* sovereigntist and as a representative of an amoral Realpolitik (see Scheuerman 2018). From this perspective, Schmitt's concept of sovereignty appears to be greatly reduced, and C.H. McIlwain would certainly question whether it is even possible to achieve a lower form of politics.
3. However, the carcass is by no means a unifying symbol. Rather, it refers to the necessity, but also to the unavoidable fallibility of any claim to genuine sovereignty. It does not represent, in the Hegelian sense, the moment in which the multitude is transformed into a people that

overcomes the contradictory particularities of its members (cf. Kervégan 2000, p. 242). Nor does it offer any external, i.e. prepolitical, normative content that, like Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* could synthesize objective authority and subjective liberties (Cristi 2005, pp. 52, 71). More importantly, it does not succeed in becoming an institutional framework that embodies and hosts sovereignty, neither in the sense of the Hobbesian artificial person nor of the Hegelian constitutional monarch (whose figure is meaningfully lacking in Krasznahorkai's story), nor does it represent an organic and historical alternative to a social order created *ex nihilo* (Lagerspetz 2004, pp. 232–233). But it is not a pure Hobbesian symbol either, for it does not suggest the separation of the state of nature and civil society, but their intertwining in a more Schmittian sense. I would like to thank a reviewer of this article for drawing my attention to the differences between Hobbes and Hegel with regard to the various aspects of sovereignty discussed in my argument.

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