

BEFORE THE PARABLE: THE READER'S TRIAL

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BEFORE THE PARABLE: THE READER'S TRIAL

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## Abstract

### BEFORE THE PARABLE: THE READER'S TRIAL

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Keywords: parable, ambiguity, literary reading, interpretation, metaphor

This study aims to explore in depth the structure of Kafka's "The Trial" by starting off from the fundamental question how it shapes the writer's, the protagonist's and the reader's status with respect to the work. The main argument of the study is that the structure of the work is such that it reduces all three parties to a very similar, almost indistinguishable position, the position of not knowing. Thus, the trial is as much a question of life and death to Kafka and the reader as it is to Josef K. What lies at the heart of the trial is the inescapability and the impossibility of reading that which has not been written yet; and thus breathing life to the work, "The Trial". Kafka, Josef K. and the reader find themselves before the inexplicable parable, and are being called to read, and thus write it. Kafka, Josef K., and the reader are arrested by the same call; the call is nothing other than an invitation to read and thus to participate in the ambiguity, or in other words, in the parable.

## Özet

### MESELİN ÖNÜNDE: OKURUN DAVASI

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Kültürel Çalışmalar, MA Tezi, 2011

Prof. Dr. Sibel Irzık

Anahtar Kelimeler: mesel, anlamda muğlaklık, edebi okuma, yorumlama, metafor

Bu çalışma Kafka'nın "Dava" adlı eserinin yazar, kahraman ve okurun konumlarını nasıl şekillendirdiği ana sorusundan yola çıkarak eserin yapısını derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, eserin yapısının bu üç unsuru da birbirine çok benzer, neredeyse birbirinden ayırt edilemez bir pozisyona, bilmeme pozisyonuna, indirgediğidir. Bu yüzden dava, en az Josef K. için olduğu kadar Kafka ve okur için de ölüm kalım meselesidir. Davanın kalbini oluşturan, henüz yazılmamış olan okumanın ve böylece esere, yani "Dava"ya, hayat vermenin kaçınılmazlığı ve imkânsızlığıdır. Kafka, Josef K. ve okur kendini muammanın karşısında bulur ve bu muammayı okumaya, yani onu yazmaya çağırılır. Kafka, Josef K. ve okur aynı çağrı tarafından tutuklanır; bu çağrı, okumaya ve böylelikle muğlaklığın, yani meselin, bir parçası olmaya davetten başka bir şey değildir.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	
KAFKA: LIVING (IN) THE PARABLE.....	1
CHAPTER 1. READING THE PARABLE:	
JOSEF K. BECOMING HIS OWN READER .....	17
a. The Silent Yes of Reading.....	27
b. Entangled in the Text.....	34
CHAPTER 2. READING <i>THE TRIAL</i> :	
READER UNDER ARREST.....	45
a. The Reader: The Liar.....	47
b. The Undoing of Untruth.....	57
CHAPTER 3. BECOMING THE PARABLE:	
KAFKA AND WRITING .....	66
CONCLUSION .....	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	81

## INTRODUCTION— KAFKA: LIVING (IN) THE PARABLE

*I live completely entangled in life.* (1914)

Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*

“But for me...it is a horrible double life from which there is probably no escape but insanity”<sup>1</sup> Kafka lives most of his life in suspension, afloat, where the life he wants to live and the life he is expected to live fail to meet. He does not ask much from life other than the solitude he desperately needs in order to be able to write: “I need a room and a vegetarian diet, almost nothing more.”<sup>2</sup> These suffice for him to *be* literature: “I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else.”<sup>3</sup> Yet he is asked to be other things as well. Foremost he is expected to be a Kafka man like his father Hermann Kafka: a full-grown, strong, authoritative man and also a husband, a father and a successful business man. Yet Franz is far from being a proper Kafka man. He is tied to life by another power, a power which is not very much compatible with the Kafka spirit of the family at all:

“Compare the two of us: I, to put it in a very much abbreviated form, a Löwy with a certain Kafka component, which, however, is not set in motion by the Kafka will to life, business, and conquest, but by a Löwyish spur that impels more secretly, more diffidently, and in another direction, and which often fails to work entirely. You, on the other hand, a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly dominance, endurance,

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<sup>1</sup> Kafka, Franz. *Franz Kafka: The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-1923*. Ed. Max Brod. London: Vintage, 1999, p. 38 (entry from February 19, 1911)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 264 (from March 9, 1914)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 230 (from August 21, 1913)

presence of mind, knowledge of human nature, a certain way of doing things on a grand scale.”<sup>4</sup>

That other direction is nothing other than literature and writing. Franz’s life is literature, and literature is his life. One should take this sentence as literally as possible because literature, for Kafka, is a matter of life and death. Yet he cannot throw himself at literature entirely and exhaustively since he is pulled back by constraints of being a human being, a man, a Kafka son.

Alvin Baum says Kafka “sees the world itself as a parable, an hermetic text in every passage of which is interwoven a complex matrix of signification.”<sup>5</sup> He is entangled in there. In fact taking a closer look at the literal meaning of the word *parable* would prove quite interesting. Charles Bernheimer underlines that the word derives from the Greek verb *paraballein*, meaning *to compare*. The verb is composed of the prefix *para* and the verb *ballein* which would literally translate as “a throwing to the side of...with the implication that this act, performed in order to compare, is somehow faulty and wrongful.”<sup>6</sup> Could we not read this imperfect throwing as Kafka’s life par excellence? If we think of *comparing* as *putting two parties side by side*, then most part of Kafka’s life is made up of faulty and wrongful comparisons which are fated to fail because they try hopelessly to put side by side what are in fact incommensurable for him. In the middle of these faulty and wrongful comparisons, Kafka has to make room for air, and it is literature alone that gives him enough room to breathe:

“Cold and empty. I feel only too strongly the limits of my abilities, narrow limits, doubtless, unless I am completely inspired. And I believe that even in the grip of inspiration I am swept along only within these narrow limits, which however, I then no longer feel because I am being swept along. Nevertheless, within these limits there is room to live, and for this reason I shall probably exploit them to a despicable degree.”<sup>7</sup>

Only within these limits is there any room for Kafka to breathe, if he is to breathe at all. Although writing is too difficult and demanding a task for Kafka “which often fails to

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<sup>4</sup> Kafka, *Franz Kafka Letter to his Father*. Trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, revised by Arthur S. Wensinger. Schocken Books Inc. Web. The URL: <http://www.kafka-franz.com/KAFKA-letter.htm> > n. pag.

<sup>5</sup> Baum, Alvin L. “Parable as Paradox in Kafka’s Erzählungen” in *MLN* 91:6 (1976). Rpt. as “Parable as Paradox in Kafka’s Stories” in *Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka*. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p. 166

<sup>6</sup> Bernheimer, Charles. “Crossing over: Kafka’s Metatextual Parable” *MLN* 95:5 (1980): p. 1264

<sup>7</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 313 (from August 30, 1914)

work entirely”, as he says in the quote above from *Letter to Father*, it is still his only way to *exist*, to *be*:

“No one’s task was so difficult, so far as I know. One might say that it is not a task at all, not even an impossible one, it is not even impossibility itself, it is nothing. It is not even as much of a child as the hope of a barren woman. But nevertheless it is the air I breathe, so long as I shall breathe at all.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Diaries* he constantly refers to his writing as failure, yet it is this failure that keeps him alive. Writing is the only possibility of his existence; it is his way of *being*. Thus, how he writes is a perfect mirror of how he experiences the world, of how he lives. Experiencing the world as a parable, Kafka writes in parables. “Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables”<sup>9</sup>, says W. Benjamin; “he had a rare capacity for creating parables.”<sup>10</sup> Breathing in the Kafkaesque world, he would produce Kafkaesque texts. Everything he writes, from diary entries to letters bear the mark of the *nebulous*-ness that beclouds his head. Deleuze emphasizes that “Style, in a great writer, is always a style of life too, not anything at all personal, but inventing a possibility of life, a way of existing.”<sup>11</sup> Exactly in that sense for Kafka writing *is* existence itself. His possibility of existence in the world could be brought about only through his becoming literature: “But I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation.”<sup>12</sup> He must write in order to exist in the physical sense, literally in flesh and blood. This is why writing is “an existential necessity” says David Constantine, “Kafka’s writing is existential.”<sup>13</sup>

Let me first start with the passages of this complex matrix of signification which build up the parable, —or in other words, the world— entangled in which Kafka lives. After setting up the pieces, I will turn to the emergent picture itself, explore the conceptions of parable and analyze the unique and peculiar relationship Kafka bears to parable. Kafka’s text is “an event, not the record of an event.”<sup>14</sup> His texts do not recount any event, it is rather the event, the anxiety itself, taking place, performing itself, in and

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<sup>8</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 402 (from January 21, 1922)

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. p. 126

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith & Michael A. Greco. London: Verso, 1998. Intro. p. xv

<sup>12</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 300 (from July 31, 1914)

<sup>13</sup> Constantine, David. “Kafka’s Writing and Our Reading” in *Cambridge Companion to Kafka*. ed. Julian Preece. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p.10

<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in Constantine, p. 19

through the text. “Kafka has no story to tell”, says David Grossvogel, “he conveys a mood, an anxiety —*his* anxiety... he and his book are part of it.”<sup>15</sup> Because Kafka’s writing *is* his life, and because his writing conserves and communicates the anxiety of his life, it is of critical importance to probe into Kafka’s life in order to better understand the dynamics of this anxiety.

“My sense of guilt actually originates in you”<sup>16</sup> says Kafka in his long letter to his father which never reaches its destination:

“[S]omething is wrong in our relationship and ... you have played your part in causing it to be so, but without its being your fault. ... I’m not going to say, of course, that I have become what I am only as a result of your influence. That would be very much exaggerated (and I am indeed inclined to this exaggeration). ... As it is, all your educational measures hit the mark exactly. ... As I now am, I am (apart, of course, from the fundamentals and the influence of life itself) the result of your upbringing and of my obedience.”<sup>17</sup>

Kafka’s world is the world of the father, the world of the name of the law; every inch of it is forever marked by the name of the father:

“Sometimes I imagine the map of the world spread out and you stretched diagonally across it. And I feel as if I could consider living in only those regions that either are not covered by you or are not within your reach. And, in keeping with the conception I have of your magnitude, these are not many and not very comforting regions.”<sup>18</sup>

Is there really any safe region left? Does the name of the father spare any space? Maybe not safe and clean but there does stand a space which at least gives hope to Kafka, and grants him space to live. Undoubtedly it is literature. Although not totally divorced from the father, the space of literature enables Kafka to subvert and undermine the name of the father and the law. In fact what this study aims to examine is how Kafka fights back the invasion of the father, and of the law in and through literature. The very last entry Kafka writes to his diary reads as follows:

“More and more fearful as I write. It is understandable. Every word, twisted in the hands of the spirits – this twist of the hand is their characteristic gesture – becomes a spear turned against the speaker. ... The only consolidation would be: it

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<sup>15</sup> Grossvogel, David I. “Kafka: Structure as Mystery” in *Mystery and its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1979. Rpt. as “*The Trial: Structure as Mystery*” in *Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka*. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p. 184

<sup>16</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

happens whether you like it or not. And what you like is of infinitesimally little help. More than consolidation is: You too have weapons.”<sup>19</sup>

Kafka writes the letter to his father during the last months of 1918 and early months of 1919. Yet, even leaving the world of the father, let alone exiling himself to regions which are at least not directly accessible to the father, would not help Kafka because he never really can leave it. In 1922 he writes this entry to his diary:

“[W]hy did I want to quit the world? Because ‘he’ would not let me live in it, in his world. ... I am now the citizen of this other world... though in this other world as well- it is the paternal heritage I carry with me. ... Is not Father’s power such that nothing (not I, certainly) could have resisted his decree?”<sup>20</sup>

A world covered by the father. The magnitude of the father is such that it barely leaves any space for his son to exist. The father, in other words, the absolute law giver, who himself is above the law, and thus not bound by it manages to cast his shadow on Kafka no matter how far away he might be. The feeling of guilt becomes part of his own self; thus wherever he goes he takes the father and the law with him.

“[F]or me as a child everything you called out to me was positively a heavenly commandment, I never forgot it, it remained for me the most important means of forming a judgment of the world, above all of forming a judgment of you yourself... [Y]ou, so tremendously the authoritative man, did not keep the commandments you imposed on me. Hence the world was for me divided into three parts: one in which I, the slave, lived under laws that had been invented only for me and which I could, I did not know why, never completely comply with; then a second world, which was infinitely remote from mine, in which you lived, concerned with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed; and finally a third world where everybody else lived happily and free from orders and from having to obey. I was continually in disgrace; either I obeyed your orders, and that was a disgrace, for they applied, after all, only to me; or I was defiant, and that was a disgrace too, for how could I presume to defy you; or I could not obey because I did not, for instance, have your strength, your appetite, your skill, although you expected it of me as a matter of course; this was the greatest disgrace of all.”<sup>21</sup>

Law is neither one nor definite. It changes constantly, and is incalculable. What remain absolute and unchanging is the name of the law only, and the feeling of guilt—which undoubtedly constitute the paternal heritage. Law renders it impossible for Franz to obey it: “I, the slave, lived under laws that had been invented only for me and which I

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<sup>19</sup>Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 423 (from June 12, 1923)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 407 (from January 28, 1922)

<sup>21</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

could, I did not know why, never completely comply with.”<sup>22</sup> If he were able to know what is it that the law wants him to do or not to do, then he would act accordingly and that would be it. There would be no more concern for the law. Yet the law he is to obey is not known to him. What is known is only that he is to obey it. As it says in *The Problem of Our Laws*, “It is an extremely painful thing to be ruled by laws that one does not know.”<sup>23</sup> It is also significant to note that the law to which he constantly fails to obey is the one that is created only for him and no one else. Franz is asked to achieve an impossible task; to obey the law which he does not know, which is founded on no stable ground and is thus incalculable. Accordingly, there is no logical pattern which would bring order and make anticipatory interpretation possible. What is more is that its content is hidden from him although he is commended to obey it. Law is the source of disgrace no matter how he acts. There is no possibility of escape from disgrace whether he obeys it or not.

We could take the matter to an even greater extreme. Kafka mentions how Hermann Kafka reacts when he hears opinions or arguments that he does not favor. Then the law withdraws, abandons them:

“Then all one gets from you is: "Do whatever you like. So far as I'm concerned you have a free hand. You're of age, I've no advice to give you," and all this with that frightful, hoarse undertone of anger and utter condemnation.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite seeming liberating, the law never lets him be liberated. Although freed, he is even more bound. Through abandoning, the law now applies even more forcefully. The disgrace does not disappear even when the law gives free license to do whatever he likes. Kafka’s status with respect to this remark resembles very much that of the man from the country with respect to the open door in the parable *Before the Law*. The law prescribes nothing, but he still cannot enter the open door. In prescribing nothing the law becomes pure ban, rendering any action impossible. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben names this structure “the structure of sovereign ban”<sup>25</sup> where law becomes indistinguishable from life and applies in no longer applying. In the section “Form of

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<sup>22</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>23</sup> Kafka, Franz. “The Problem of Our Laws” in *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. Web. no pag.

<sup>24</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p. 49

Law” Agamben examines how law affirms itself by abandoning, in other words by not prescribing anything. “Nothing – and certainly not the refusal of the doorkeeper—prevents the man from the country from passing through the door of the Law if not the fact that this door is already open and that the Law prescribes nothing.”<sup>26</sup> The free license of the father or the already openness of the door is that which makes any action impossible:

“Kafka’s legend presents the pure form in which law affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it no longer prescribes anything—which is to say, as pure ban. ... According to the schema of the sovereign exception, law applies to him in no longer applying, and holds him in his ban in abandoning him outside itself. The open door destined only for him includes him in excluding him and excludes him in including him. And this is precisely the summit and the root of every law.”

Agamben explains that the structure of the sovereign ban corresponds to the structure of “a law that is in force but does not signify.”<sup>27</sup> In similar fashion, the content of the law is not known to Kafka; he is thus Kafka is reduced to a state of ignorance which guarantees the feeling of guilt. It is the name of the law, not the content which rules – and rules absolutely. The absence of content enables the law to lay claim to very life itself: “[E]mpty potentiality of law is so much in force as to become indistinguishable from life.”<sup>28</sup> Life becomes indistinguishable from law; Kafka from guilt, Josef K. from trial. Canceling the law would mean canceling one’s own self along with it. Their existences coincide:

“I picture the equality which would then arise between us—and which you would be able to understand better than any other form of equality— as so beautiful because then I could be a free, grateful, guiltless, upright son, and you could be an untroubled untyrannical, sympathetic, contented father. But to this end everything that ever happened would have to be undone, that is, we ourselves should have to be canceled out.”

Empty inside and indistinguishable from life, law becomes impossible to comply with because it becomes impossible to distinguish what is allowed and what is forbidden: “[I]n the state of exception, it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder.”<sup>29</sup> There is no possibility of knowing it before acting it out, in

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<sup>26</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 49

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 51

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57

other words, only when it is too late. Furthermore law seems to be less concerned with the actions or facts than its own decision. As Josef K.'s uncle exclaims: "To have a trial like that means you've lost it"<sup>30</sup> once you are entangled in law, then you are already convicted, and that is why you draw law to yourself. The proceedings do not change you status as convict. As Titorelli explains, the actual acquittal is a probability which in fact does not exist.<sup>31</sup> A similar exclamation arises from *Letter to Father*: "One was ... already punished before one even knew that one had done something bad."<sup>32</sup>

Agamben refers to a passage from Jean-Luc Nancy where Nancy delineates being abandoned by the law, which points to another critical aspect of the structure: "Abandonment does not constitute a subpoena to present oneself before this or that court of law. It is a compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such and in its totality."<sup>33</sup> In other words it a process that continues as long as one is alive. Every moment, every piece of life, "[e]verything belongs to the court" in the most literal sense.<sup>34</sup> And it is such a court that dwells in old, dirty and narrow attics and which can reach you any time anywhere. The trial is not over as long as one lives. The reverse also holds true, one lives as long as the trial continues. Life and existence end when the trial ends. Agamben emphasizes that "[I]nsofar as law is maintained as pure form in a state of virtual exception, it lets bare life subsist before it."<sup>35</sup> Law bestows life, just like "an undeserved gift"<sup>36</sup> in Kafka's own words:

"It was ... terrible when you ran around the table, shouting, grabbing at one, obviously not really trying to grab, yet pretending to, and Mother (finally) had to rescue one, as it seemed. Once again one had, so it seemed to the child, remained alive through your mercy and bore one's life henceforth as an undeserved gift from you."<sup>37</sup>

Life is in the hands of the law, and thus could be lost at any time without any advance indication because neither the content of the law could be known nor what course of action it will take the next moment. If Franz is still alive it is a gift which the father sees

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<sup>30</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Mike Mitchell. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009. Web. p, 69

<sup>31</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Idris Parry. New York: Penguin Books, 1994. p. 118

<sup>32</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 58

<sup>34</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Idris Parry, p. 118

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 55

<sup>36</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

fit for him. An *undeserved* gift though. There is another entry where Kafka talks about how he receives what the father gives him: “I could enjoy what you gave, but only in humiliation, weariness, weakness, and with a sense of guilt. That was why I could be grateful to you for everything only as a beggar is.”<sup>38</sup> This is how Kafka sees his own existence in the world covered by the father. He lives at the mercy of the law.

“[I]f anyone has tried to calculate in advance how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the full-grown man, would behave toward one another, he could have assumed that you would simply trample me underfoot so that nothing was left of me. Well, that did not happen...But perhaps something worse happened.”<sup>39</sup>

In fact the magnitude of the father is not a figure of speech. The physical body and health is another critical aspect of the relationship of Kafka to the father. Both the diaries and also the letter include many statements describing the contrariness of the conditions of their bodies. Their features such as size and health come assume new signification and meaning. They are manifestations of their modes of existing in the world, and also existing in relation to each other:

“[S]ince there was nothing at all I was certain of, since I needed to be provided at every instant with a new confirmation of my existence, since nothing was in my very own, undoubted, sole possession, determined unequivocally only by me—in sober truth a disinherited son—naturally I became unsure even to the thing nearest to me, my own body. I shot up, tall and lanky, without knowing what to do with my lankiness, the burden was too heavy, the back became bent; I scarcely dared to move, certainly not to exercise, I remained weakly.”<sup>40</sup>

Kafka describes his life as hesitation, “My life is a hesitation before birth.”<sup>41</sup> The hesitation of existing in the world of the father thanks to the undeserved gift from him, that hesitation manifests itself physically in Kafka’s body. It is as if his body takes the shape of the pain and guilt of being alive. In *Letter to Father* there is another very striking piece, a memory from childhood days which displays how the physical body is the symbol of power or powerlessness:

“I was...weighed down by your mere physical presence. I remember, for instance, how we often undressed in the same bathing hut. There was I, skinny, weakly, slight; you strong, tall, broad. Even inside the hut I felt a miserable specimen, and what's more, not only in your eyes but in the eyes of the whole

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<sup>38</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 405 (from January 24, 1922)

world, for you were for me the measure of all things. But then when we stepped out of the bathing hut before the people, you holding me by my hand, a little skeleton, unsteady, barefoot on the boards, frightened of the water, incapable of copying your swimming strokes, which you, with the best of intentions, but actually to my profound humiliation, kept on demonstrating, then I was frantic with desperation and at such moments all my bad experiences in all areas, fitted magnificently together. I felt best when you sometimes undressed first and I was able to stay behind in the hut alone and put off the disgrace of showing myself in public until at last you came to see what I was doing and drove me out of the hut. I was grateful to you for not seeming to notice my anguish, and besides, I was proud of my father's body. By the way, this difference between us remains much the same to this very day."<sup>42</sup>

The body could be thought of as a means of affirming one's existence. The weakness and fragility of Kafka's body however makes his existence in the world even more difficult and tentative. How could he survive while he is only "a physical wreck"<sup>43</sup>:

"It is certain that a major obstacle to my progress is my physical condition. Nothing can be accomplished with such a body...My body is too long for its weakness, it hasn't the least bit of fat to engender a blessed warmth, to preserve an inner fire, no fat on which the spirit could occasionally nourish itself beyond its daily need without damage to the whole. How shall a weak heart that lately has troubled me so often be able to pound the blood through all the length of these legs? ... Everything is pulled apart throughout the length of my body."<sup>44</sup> "[M]y life ... has progressed at most in the sense that decay progresses in a rotten tooth."<sup>45</sup>

Kafka's physical body could be thought of as a diary itself. It keeps the marks events make on his existence. The most drastic of such marks is the tuberculosis, with which Kafka is diagnosed in 1917. He describes the illness as the troubled relationship with Felice Bauer made manifest:

"If the infection in your lung is only a symbol, ... a symbol of the infection whose inflammation is called F. and whose depth is its deep justification, if this is so then the medical advice ... is also a symbol."<sup>46</sup>

Kafka's relationship with Felice B. lasts 5 years, from 1912 to 1917, which includes Kafka's *breakthrough* and corresponds to the period in which Kafka produces his major works such as *The Judgment*, *The Metamorphosis*, *America*, *In the Penal Colony*, *The Trial*, *Great Wall of China*. Kafka's two unsuccessful engagements to Felice B. prove

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<sup>42</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>43</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 393 (from October 17, 1921)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125 (from November 22, 1911)

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 404 (from January 23, 1922)

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 383 (from September 15, 1917)

that marriage is an impossible task for Kafka. Its impossibility lies in the potential threats marriage pose to Kafka's physical existence. There are two weapons of marriage which could literally kill Kafka. *Diaries* focus more on the possible lethal effects of marriage on Kafka's writing. Since there is no life without writing for Kafka, any obstacle before writing is an obstacle before life. These entries are from the list he makes for his arguments against marrying:

“I must be alone a great deal. What I accomplish was only the result of being alone. ... I hate everything that does not relate to literature.... The fear of connexion, of passing into the other. Then I'll never be alone again...[T]he person I am in the company of my sisters has been entirely different from the person I am in the company of other people. Fearless, powerful, surprising, moved as I otherwise am only when I write. If through the intermediation of my wife I could be like that in the presence of everyone! But then would I not be at the expense of my writing? Not that, not that!”<sup>47</sup>

Marriage could cost Kafka his writing, which would mean his life. He describes his engagement saying, “Was tied hand and foot like a criminal. ... And that was my engagement; everybody made an effort to bring me to life.”<sup>48</sup> The only possible way for him to continue to exist in the world is literature. In order for him to write, he needs to be by himself. This is why bachelor life is the only chance of survival: “[I] nevertheless have the feeling that my monotonous, empty, mad bachelor's life has some justification. I can once more carry on a conversation with myself, and don't stare so into complete emptiness.”<sup>49</sup> He writes this entry after he breaks his engagement to Felice B. It is as if he comes back to life only after the break up.

*The Letter to Father* underlines one more way in which marriage could result in Kafka's annihilation. Marrying means founding a family for oneself, becoming a husband and the head of the family. That also means becoming equal to the father. Yet, this equality is to bring no freedom but destruction to Kafka:

“I would be your equal; all old and even new shame and tyranny would be mere history. It would be like a fairy tale, but precisely there lies the questionable element. It is too much; so much cannot be achieved....But to this end everything that ever happened would have to be undone, that is, we ourselves should have to be canceled out.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 225-6 (from July 21, 1913)

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 275 (from June 6, 1914)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p.303(from August 15, 1914)

<sup>50</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

“[W]e being what we are, marrying is barred to me because it is your very own domain.”<sup>51</sup> The domain of marriage is also the domain of the father:

“If I, in the particular unhappy relationship in which I stand to you, want to become independent, I must do something that will have, if possible, no connection with you at all; though marrying is the greatest thing of all and provides the most honorable independence, it also stands at the same time in the closest relation to you.”<sup>52</sup>

In a paradoxical way what at first sight seems to be the surest way to independence turns out to be the path leading right into the heart of the danger. His trials of marrying end up only in failures because marriage turns into yet another web that entangles him in life. It draws him even more to the world of the father, whose “consequences are by no means unpredictable.”<sup>53</sup> In that sense women—including the mother—are allied with the father, trying to take him to a place where he cannot breathe. Seen from that perspective Felice resembles the women characters in *The Trial* who are on the side of the court. In *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari underline the essential tie the women characters bear to the court, and draws attention to their functions in the novel. Fräulein Bürstner, Elsa, the washerwomen, Leni... “each is in ‘contact’, in ‘connection’, in ‘contiguity’, with the essential—that is,.. with the trial, as ultimate powers of the continuous.”<sup>54</sup> “[T]hey”, Deleuze and Guattari say, “bring about the deterritorialization of K by making territories, which each one marks in her own way, rapidly come into play.”<sup>55</sup> They are “anticonjugal and antifamilial”<sup>56</sup>, and thus bring together “the qualities of sister, maid, and whore”, and “present an even more precise blend of things.”<sup>57</sup> They stand at “the intersection of all the machines- familial, conjugal, bureaucratic”<sup>58</sup> and they make them take flight. They disturb the equilibrium. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that women are like the sounds of the footsteps of the court, declaring its appearance at hand. They lure Josef K. into the court. It is as if the initial move on the part of the court comes always with the appearance of women:

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<sup>51</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 228 (from August 14, 1913)

<sup>54</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 63

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 68

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 64

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 64-5

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 65

“the opening of a segment that they belong to; they also mark its end... Thus they function as a sort of signal that one approaches and moves away from. But, above all else, each has precipitated her own series, her segment in a castle or trial, by eroticizing it; and the following segment will only begin or end, will only be precipitated, through the action of another young woman.”<sup>59</sup>

It is worth noting that the essential relationship between the women characters and the court resembles the relationship Kafka reads into their position vis-à-vis the father and marriage. They try to draw him nearer to the domain of the law. Thus their help is never really help but only deceit.

Being equal to the father through marriage would require sexual intercourse too, so that he too can become a father himself. But this physical side of marriage is yet another torment for Kafka. Sex is a source of repulsion and disgust; it is filthy: “Coitus as punishment of being together. Live as ascetically as possible, more ascetically than a bachelor, that is the only possible way for me to endure marriage.”<sup>60</sup> The source of the filth of sexual intercourse is also to be found in Kafka’s view of the father. The father has the enjoyment of married life without any shame or guilt, while he advises Kafka to visit brothels. This advice of his disappoints Kafka deeply. In *Letter to Father* he says if the world is divided between the father and Kafka himself, and it is the father who gets to have the clean and pleasurable part; then what remains for Kafka—the other wicked part—is only the filth:

“[W]hat you advised me to do was in your opinion and even more in my opinion at that time, the filthiest thing possible. ... The important thing was rather that you yourself remained outside your own advice, a married man, a pure man, above such things; this was probably intensified for me at the time by the fact that even marriage seemed to me shameless; and hence it was impossible for me to apply to my parents the general information I had picked up about marriage. Thus you became still purer, rose still higher. So there was hardly any smudge of earthly filth on you at all.... if the world consisted only of me and you (a notion I was much inclined to have), then this purity of the world came to an end with you and, by virtue of your advice, the filth began with me.”<sup>61</sup>

Another indispensable piece of Kafka’s world is undoubtedly his identity as a Jewish Czech of Prague who speaks German, and also his Jewish roots and his stance on Judaism. I will focus more on the Jewish tradition in the last chapter when discussing the significance of parables in religions, particularly Judaism, and its implications for Kafka’s writing in parables. Before going into the issue of the German language let us

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<sup>59</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, p. 68

<sup>60</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 228 (from August 14, 1913)

<sup>61</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

start with language itself. In *Letter to Father* Kafka tells why he falls silent, and prefers not to speak in the world of the father:

“The impossibility of getting on calmly together had one more result, actually a very natural one: I lost the capacity to talk. I dare say I would not have become a very eloquent person in any case, but I would, after all, have acquired the usual fluency of human language. But at a very early stage you forbade me to speak. Your threat, "Not a word of contradiction!" and the raised hand that accompanied it have been with me ever since. What I got from you—and you are, whenever it is a matter of your own affairs, an excellent talker—was a hesitant, stammering mode of speech, and even that was still too much for you, and finally I kept silent, at first perhaps out of defiance, and then because I could neither think nor speak in your presence. And because you were the person who really brought me up, this has had its repercussions throughout my life.”<sup>62</sup>

When we consider “[t]he terrible uncertainty of [his] inner existence”<sup>63</sup> and the weakness of his physical body, it is as if his voice has also taken the shape that best fits to Franz’s existence. From head to toe he is under the incalculable and irrational law which could take the gift of life from him even at the least expected minute. Even talking is not allowed lest it would express unfavorable opinions. In fact, whether it is really possible for him to speak any opinion that would not be unfavorable is a quite legitimate question. His stammering is only another indication of his hesitation in the face of existence, like his illnesses. The fundamental cause is the inability to *be*, to exert or affirm himself in the world of the father, which has repercussions *throughout* his life. Here is another piece, this time from the *Diaries*, where Kafka speaks of not being able to speak because he lacks the solidity to complete a sentence:

“The difficulties ... I have in speaking to people arise from the fact that my thinking, or rather the content of my consciousness, is entirely nebulous ... conversation with people demands pointedness, solidity, and sustained coherence, qualities not to be found in me. No one will want to lie in the clouds of mist with me, and even if someone did, *I* couldn’t expel the mist from my head; when two people come together it dissolves of itself and is nothing.”<sup>64</sup>

Kafka’s diary entries are full of reproaches and complaints about not being able to write—to write better, or to write at all. The nebulous-ness beclouding his mind and body manifests itself in writing as well as speaking, and it has a lot to do with the German language as well. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka emphasizes “the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing

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<sup>62</sup> Kafka, *Letter to Father*, n.pag.

<sup>63</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 220 (from May 3, 1913)

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, p. 329 (from January 24, 1915)

otherwise.”<sup>65</sup> Kafka writes in his diary that he is not able to love his mother enough simply because of the German language:

“Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no ‘Mutter’, to call her ‘Mutter’ makes her a little comic. ... We give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much the more heavily, ‘Mutter’ is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with Christian splendour Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called ‘Mutter’ therefore becomes not only comic but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn’t imagine ‘Mutter’ behind it. I believe that that is only the memories of the ghetto that still preserve the Jewish family, for the word ‘Vater’ too is far from meaning the Jewish father.”<sup>66</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka invents his way of surviving in the German language. The hesitant and stuttering Kafka now makes language —not the German language but language in its entirety— stutter. Putting the German language of Prague in perpetual disequilibrium, Kafka makes language take flight and “tremble from head to toe.”<sup>67</sup> This is nothing other than minorization of the German language. What Kafka does with German of Prague, Deleuze explains, is to “invent a *minor use* of the major language within which [he] express[es] [himself] entirely; [he] minorize[s] this language, much as in music, where the minor mode refers to dynamic combinations in perpetual disequilibrium.”<sup>68</sup> This minor use of language produces “words [which] create silence.”<sup>69</sup> “It is as if the language were stretched along an abstract and infinitely varied line” says Deleuze, and adds, “[t]his exceeds the possibilities of speech and attains the power of... language in its entirety.”<sup>70</sup> This is how Kafka speaks in a foreign language; “he carves out a nonpreexistent foreign language *within* his own language.”<sup>71</sup> “Anyone who cannot come to terms with his life while he is alive” says Kafka in a diary entry from 1921:

“needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate – he has little success in this – but with his other hand he can note down what he sees among the

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<sup>65</sup> Kafka qtd. in Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, p. 16

<sup>66</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 88 (from October 24, 1911)

<sup>67</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Essays Critical and Clinical*. p, 109

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 109

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 113

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 109

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 110

ruins, for he sees different (and more) things than do the others; after all, dead as he is in his own life time, he is the real survivor.”<sup>72</sup>

It is this other hand, the dead hand, which writes that sets language into perpetual disequilibrium. Kafka’s language is the language of a stuttering existence.

I argue that Kafka’s use of parable is one way that Kafka adopts in order to make language tremble. Parable is a text that suspends itself at the limit of language and thus makes it possible to “examine the space between language and that which is beyond language.”<sup>73</sup> Kafka’s text is a text that constantly undermines itself, and as such it is a text that “never arrives.”<sup>74</sup> Charles Bernheimer claims that Kafka’s text has a “metatextual structure [which] undoes the concept of parable advanced within the text itself”, and concludes that Kafka’s text is “a parable of metatextuality.”<sup>75</sup> It defies itself, and any interpretation while leaving out no way but to interpret. In abrahamic religions, and especially in Judaism, for which oral tradition is exceptionally important in the transmission of religious truths, parable has a unique place. Situated in the middle of “the gap between the literal and the figurative”, parable forces its reader to go beyond the literal, “to move from the echo of truth to the very source of truth.”<sup>76</sup> It has traditionally been used as a vehicle through which truth is made accessible and graspable to its readers. However with Kafka, parable is subverted. It does not enlighten any more, but only darkens. It does not bring truth closer but only marks its remoteness and inaccessibility, underlining again and again the gap hanging between truth and the reader. Seeing the world as a parable, Kafka could not better express his “horrible double life”<sup>77</sup> but through the parable, the arch-double.

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<sup>72</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 394 (from October 19, 1921)

<sup>73</sup> Powell, Matthew T. “‘From an Urn Already Crumbled to Dust’: Kafka’s Use of Parable and The Midrashic Mashal” *REN* 58:4 (2006): p. 273

<sup>74</sup> Bernheimer, Charles. “Crossing over: Kafka’s Metatextual Parable” *MLN* 95:5 (1980) p. 1262

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1263

<sup>76</sup> Powell, p. 273

<sup>77</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 38 (from February 19, 1911)

CHAPTER 1. READING THE PARABLE:  
JOSEF K. BECOMING THE READER

*'No,' said the priest, 'one does not have to believe everything is true, one only has to believe that it is necessary'. 'Depressing thought,' K said. 'It makes the lie fundamental to world order.'*

Kafka, *The Trial*

Words fluctuate in Kafka. They are never safe, neither is the reader. Each word is a parable in itself. Kafka's contempt for metaphor is well-known. Yet, even the literal cannot be literal enough, for words cannot be that which they signify. Words are doomed to fail to meet the demand Kafka makes of them, "the demand that truthful speech be the direct emanation of being."<sup>78</sup> Thus the abyss of meaning opens and Kafka appears as the trapeze artist, not unlike the one in *First Sorrow*, living on the thin rope that hangs above this abyss. This critical rope is made up of words only, and it acts as the fragile line that separates life from death. *The Trial* is a masterpiece of such decisive words. What lies at the heart of *The Trial* is but a question of words. What do they

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<sup>78</sup> Sokel, Walter H. "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka" *The German Quarterly* Vol. 52, No.3 (May, 1979), p. 371.

mean? How do they acquire their meaning? Josef K. is unable to comprehend what is happening to/around him precisely because for Josef K. and also for us as readers, there is always a gap between what is being said and what Josef K. and we see happening:

“Who is speaking to us about these things? Can’t he see that the world he is looking at doesn’t make sense? He seems to be part of it and yet apart from it; he tries ever so thoughtfully to work it out, and so presumably has a point of reference outside it—that is what the logic of his as of all language implies—and yet he never succeeds. Indeed, his thoughtful narration is the world he is failing to make sense of. And it is this that lends to Kafka’s narrations their nightmare character. For a nightmare too engulfs us, leaving us no independence of view or action, no possibility of escape or control. We cannot separate ourselves from it: that *is* the nightmare, as we recognize on waking and half feel while we are in its grip.”<sup>79</sup>

This, Anthony Thorlby suggests, is how Kafka takes the nightmare to the farthest limit, forces it to become apparent, and discloses that “language engulfs itself and the world.”<sup>80</sup> “[B]y blurring the distinctions we are used to: between thoughts and things, between literal and metaphorical usage, between the speaker’s view and what he is speaking about”<sup>81</sup>, Kafka “expose[s] the illusoriness of the interpretive, metaphorical activity itself, into which language leads us in vain pursuit of truth”, and challenges Josef K. *and* the reader who are still under “the troubling illusion of there being a world to explain”<sup>82</sup> *The Trial* is the ax for the world of whose existence language has been persuading us :

“I believe that we should read only books that bite and sting us. We need books which affect us like a very painful calamity...like being cast into forests far from all human beings, like suicide; a book must be an ax for the frozen sea inside us. That I believe.”<sup>83</sup>

Language bridges the gap between the inexplicable corporeality and human thought by “cover[ing] existence with a familiar and comprehensible surface”<sup>84</sup>, that is, meaning. In and through meaning, language makes the world appear as solid, stable, rational and logical. Yet, “[b]eneath this exterior, there lay for Kafka magnitudes of infinitely vast

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<sup>79</sup> Thorlby, Anthony. “Kafka’s Narrative: A Matter of Form” in *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*. Ed. Alan Udoff. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987. Rpt. in Bloom’s *Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka—New Edition*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010, p. 29

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 25

<sup>83</sup> Kafka qtd. in Sokel, “Frozen Sea and River of Narration”, p.352

<sup>84</sup> Thorlby, p. 35

and unspeakably dangerous.”<sup>85</sup> This is why reading Kafka is lethal, always a question of life and death.

The famous opening sentence of *The Trial* is thus quite significant. The first sentence is our first step; and our first step is a paradox, harbinger of what is yet to come not only for Josef K. but also for us, the readers of Josef K. and Kafka. First of all, the sentence is a weird combination of one assumption and two statements: “Somebody must have made a false accusation against Josef K., for he was arrested one morning without having done anything wrong.”<sup>86</sup> The first part of the sentence suggests only a possibility, be it strong or weak. Somebody may or may not have slandered Josef K. However the way things stand, it makes more sense to assume that somebody actually did, because Josef K. got arrested. The lethal logic manifests itself in this very first sentence. Already we, the readers, are searching for the missing causes to explain the evident facts (or effects) even before Josef K. himself. And moreover, it soon becomes apparent that what we and Josef K. turn to is the same: to make assumptions. The second part of the sentence does not make a suggestion but states a fact, “he was arrested.”<sup>87</sup> But the sentence is not over yet, here is the drastic phrase: “without having done anything wrong.”<sup>88</sup> This part too is presented as a fact, not as an assumption: He has not done anything wrong. Thus this addition leaves no room for the possibility of Josef K.’s guilt. What we have in our hands is nothing more than Josef K.’s innocence, his arrest and the assumption that something must be wrong; the connection between these two conditions —his innocence and his arrest— must be a mis-connection because these two facts are mutually exclusive and contradictory. The only way the two can stay together in a meaningful way is with the intervention of the assumption that there is something wrong; that there must be an accusation made against Josef K., and that the accusation must be false. However, an assumption by definition points to a substitution, to a lack, to something missing in the chain of cause and effect. Fragile and tentative as it is, the assumption is essential, indispensable and even critical if this sentence is to make any sense. We are perfectly aware that an assumption may or may not correspond to the real case, and that the possibility that an assumption may in fact be wrong does not eliminate it from the scene. In fact it might prove quite illuminating to take a look at

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<sup>85</sup> Thorlby, p. 35

<sup>86</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Idris Parry, p.1

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

the definition of the word in dictionaries. MacMillan Online Dictionary includes two entries for the word *assumption*. The first definition is as follows, “something that you consider likely to be true even though no one has told you directly or even though you have no proof.”<sup>89</sup> The word *directly* calls for further attention here. Assumption misses the immediacy, the un-mediatedness of the event; it comes either before or after the event. It relates to the event only delicately and tentatively. Such vagueness is the defining feature of assumption, and Sokel argues, also of Kafka:

“Kafka’s vocabulary is one of inference and conjecture. Favorite words are ‘apparently’, ‘ostensibly’, ‘maybe’, ‘actually’. Kafka prefers ‘it seems’ to ‘it is’. His sentences often consist of two clauses: the first states a fact or a guess; the second qualifies, questions, negates it. The conjunction ‘but’ is, therefore, most characteristic of Kafka’s thought structure. ...Kafka favors the subjunctive. The only bridge between the protagonist and his environment is surmise.”<sup>90</sup>

Assumption is not defined by its truth or falsehood; rather it is defined by its probability to have been/to be the case only so far as it can account for this particular state-of-affairs. Could the situation at hand be explained if things were assumed to have happened this way? The missing link that we want to re-establish is not the link that ties the assumption to the real world so to say, but the link that ties the end result to the cause. We are not interested in whether the assumption is or ever was a real possibility, we only want to know whether it would explain the situation at hand. Therefore Kafka’s use of subjunctive form is critical; the subjunctive intrinsically makes assumptions. Sokel refers to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and explains that the subjunctive form in Kafka “acts as the grammatical correlative of a structural device called *anagnorisis*.”<sup>91</sup> *Anagnorisis* is the Greek word for *recognition*, or *discovery*. We may think of it, Sokel says, as “the hero’s surprise at the unexpected turns of events.”<sup>92</sup> I would like to extend this definition, and suggest thinking of it in terms of the hero’s coming to know, or his recognition that he had been making *false* assumptions up until then. However, there is a vital difference between the kind of recognition in the classical Greek tragedies and in *The Trial*. Aristotle defines recognition in *Poetics* as “a change from ignorance to

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<sup>89</sup> "Assumption" Def. MacMillan Online Dictionary. 2009-2011. July 15, 2010. The URL: <<http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/assumption>>

<sup>90</sup> Sokel, Walter H. *Franz Kafka*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966. p.11

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

knowledge.”<sup>93</sup> In the Ancient Greek tragedies *anagnorisis* is really a leap from ignorance to knowledge of the truth both for the hero and for the audience. Both parties get to know the true state-of-affairs. Yet in Kafka, *anagnorisis* leads only to untruth. As a matter of fact, Josef K.’s assumptions always turn out to be false. They always point towards what is *not* truth. Therefore in *The Trial*, recognition does not disclose any truth either for Josef K. or for the reader. In fact it only prolongs Josef K.’s and readers’ ignorance by proving to them that once again they have missed the truth, rather than show the truth that they have been missing. Sokel argues that in Kafka, *anagnorisis* only “reveal[s] the discrepancy between the protagonist’s consciousness and the truth underlying the story.”<sup>94</sup> What we miss here is the link to the real world on the level of assumption. We and Josef K. discover only that Josef K. has perceived the world in a wrong way; that the world is *not* like what Josef K. thinks it is. We do not ever know how the world really is. We only know how Josef K. conceives of it, and that he always misconceives it. The real world is suspended in order to attach reason / cause / meaning to the self-evident facts.

There is more. The first sentence makes an impossible demand from the reader. It requires of the reader to deal with the two contradictory things at once: both that Josef K. has not done anything wrong, and that he is under arrest. We can either believe the narrator, or suspend our judgment till more information is presented. But this *either/or* is inclusive; it is not an exclusive one. After all, “[c]orrect understanding of a matter and misunderstanding of the same matter do not exclude each other entirely.”<sup>95</sup> Thus, we must follow two paths at once so that we can continue reading. “The premise in the paradox”, says Constantine “is worth insisting on. It ought to prepare us for the paradox in the work and deter us from saying things must be this or that. They are more likely, in Kafka, to be this and that, in contradiction.”<sup>96</sup> On the one hand the reader might partly side with the narrator and tentatively believe Josef K.’s innocence, on the other hand s/he is still on the watch, assuming that the narrator may or may not be telling the truth. The reader acts like Josef K., and searches for clues that either support or undermine the sentences s/he is faced with. S/he has already taken the step into the

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<sup>93</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. Book XI. Trans. S.H. Butcher. N/A: Orange Street Press, 1998. p.22

<sup>94</sup> Sokel, *Franz Kafka*, p.11

<sup>95</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p.169

<sup>96</sup> Constantine, p.13

world of infinite assumptions. What if the narrator is telling the truth, and what if it is not? If the reader could determine which way to go, that would relieve him/her of a great burden: the burden to calculate and keep all possibilities in mind at equal validity, just like Josef K.. Making a choice would eliminate the other possibilities, and thus would make the reader's job much easier. Then s/he would know how to judge each word, and know what it means. Yet, the reader is not allowed to make any choices. After a short while this question concerning the truth of the narrator's words becomes irrelevant, just like the truth of the court or Josef K.'s guilt. Hailed by the words, the reader abandons the search for the truth *behind* the words and instead his/her gaze shifts to fall on words themselves. The reader must act as if s/he had made a choice, and chose, all at once, each and every possibility of meaning which those words might entail. We never know if our assumptions as to the meanings of the words are true or false; yet we have to make those assumptions because making assumption is our only possibility to make way for our reading. We must assume that *such it must be* corresponds to *such it is*. We must assume that this is truth while we are most ignorant of truth. *Forcibly* we must be transformed into liars and thus, into readers. We do not have to believe that assumptions are true; we only have to believe they are necessary.

*The Trial* opens with Josef K. opening his eyes, and the first chapter covers the whole day from waking up to going bed. When Josef K. wakes up in the morning of the arrest day and sees the warders around him, what immediately comes to his mind is that this whole thing must be a *mise-en-scène*, a theatrical play, a make-believe; "One could of course regard the whole affair as a joke, a crude joke... This was of course possible, perhaps all he had to do was laugh in some way in the warders' faces and they would laugh with him."<sup>97</sup> This whole situation would only make sense to Josef K. if it were a joke. Then it would mean that this state-of-affairs was not in fact the real case, and that the real meaning of this whole situation lay beyond what is seen. Maybe his colleagues at the bank had prepared him this crude joke for his thirtieth birthday. That could be one possibility. Yet, when he speaks to the warders it becomes less and less probable that it really is a joke. However, neither Josef K. nor are we, as readers, totally sure that it is not a joke. We wait with Josef K., suspending our judgment. We too want answers. He talks to the warders; it is of no use. Speaking with them does not change much for Josef K.'s comprehension of the situation. In fact it complicates it even more; his unanswered

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<sup>97</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 3

questions give birth to more questions. There is no communication or dialogue that builds up with the exchange of words, which could calm Josef K. at least to some degree. Some dialogue could clarify the situation and give an account of it, maybe even confirm that this is not an everyday situation, and that he is right to be perplexed. Such an approach would still not answer all of Josef K.'s questions surely, but it would at least re-affirm that they understand each other and that there is no gap between what the one says and what the other understands from what is said. Josef K. would feel less lost, and more in control. However, it soon turns out that there is always an unbridgeable gap between what the warders say and what Josef K. understands and vice versa:

‘Who are you?’ asked K., stating up in his bed. But the man ignored the question, as if his appearance were to be accepted without query, and merely said: ‘You rang?’ ‘Anna is supposed to be bringing me my breakfast,’ and then he tried to determine through silent observation and reflection who the man really was. ... ‘He wants Anna to bring him his breakfast.’ This was followed by a short burst of laughter in the next room.”<sup>98</sup>

Josef K. wakes up to see these weird looking strangers in his bed room. His daily routine is disturbed, and now all of a sudden his usual call for breakfast has turned into something different and unfamiliar. It is ridiculed by the warders as if in an effort to translate Josef K.'s words so that they correspond to the correct meanings. When Josef K.'s words come to mean what the warders assume them to mean, they become only laughable. The way Josef K. cannot make himself *heard properly* is very much like the *squealing* of the metamorphosed Gregor: “[the] squealing which allowed his words to remain articulate literally for only a moment, then stifled them so much as they died away that you couldn’t tell if you’d heard them properly.”<sup>99</sup> The two protagonists’ trials to speak and make themselves heard—but heard *properly*—are thus essentially not very unlike. This very first scene of the novel already hints at the abyss which opens between what the warders’ mean and what Josef K understands.

Then follows a second scene which leads Josef K. to end his futile trials to speak to the warders, and accept that the two parties do not hear each other properly, for some curious reason:

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<sup>98</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, p.1

<sup>99</sup> Kafka, Franz. “The Metamorphosis” in *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Trans. Joyce Crick. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2009, p.31

“...you can't make him understand anything,' said the other [warder]. K. made no further answer; do I, he thought, have to let myself be even more confused by the twaddle of these lowest instruments...? 'Anyway, they are talking about things they do not understand at all. ... A few words with someone on my own level will make things incomparable clearer than the longest conversation with these two.'”<sup>100</sup>

Josef K. is still hopeful that he may be properly heard. When he finally meets the supervisor, to whom he thought he could finally express himself and be understood, the same spell still appears to be in the air. Josef K. begins his attempts to make sense of the happenings once again. He takes up from where he had stopped:

“I'm not going to say I regard the whole thing as a joke; the arrangements that have been made seem too extensive for that. All the people in the boarding-house would have to be involved, and all of you too. That would take it beyond the limits of a joke. So I'm not going to say it's a joke.' ... 'But on the other hand,' K. went on, ... the matter can't be very important either. I deduce this from the fact that I'm accused of something but can't find the slightest guilt to justify an accusation.'”<sup>101</sup>

Now he decides that it cannot be a joke, as he had earlier supposed, and cites his reasons, and reasons behind those reasons. “You are making a great mistake” answers the supervisor: “I am absolutely unable to tell you that you stand accused, or rather I don't know if you are. You are under arrest, that's true, I don't know more than that.”<sup>102</sup> Josef K. answers with only one sentence: “But it's senseless.”<sup>103</sup> Thus fails Josef K.'s second trial to read the situation correctly.

““You are under arrest, that's all. That's what I had to communicate to you, I've done that, and I've also seen how you've taken it... [W]e can take leave of each other... I suppose you'll want to go to the bank now?’ ‘To the bank?’ asked K. ‘I thought I was under arrest.’... So he said again: ‘How can I go to the bank? I am under arrest.’ ‘Ah yes,’ said the supervisor, ... ‘You have misunderstood me. It's true you are under arrest, but that doesn't mean you can't follow your occupation. And you won't be hampered in your normal way of life.’”<sup>104</sup>

What does being under arrest mean then? Why does Josef K. not already know what it entails? Why can Josef K. not take the meaning of being under arrest for granted? Why is what the word means not already self-evident to him? Josef K. has to re-define the meaning of *being under arrest* so that it can correspond to the kind of arrest that the

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<sup>100</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p.5

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 11

supervisor is talking about. He cannot ever take the meaning of any word for granted; he always has to find the correct meaning on his own. With this new definition of the word, he now comes to think “[b]eing arrested is not so bad.”<sup>105</sup> Although Josef K. corrects and adjusts his language for this time to the language of the warders and the supervisor, he continues naturally to think in his own usual way, and shortly after realizes that this new definition still does not make much sense to him either: “But then it seems it was not even very necessary to tell me about my arrest.”<sup>106</sup> “It was my duty answers the supervisor.”<sup>107</sup> “‘A stupid duty,’ say[s] Josef K. unrelentingly.”<sup>108</sup> It is not that different than being totally free. If it will not prevent him from living exactly the same way than what is the meaning of being under arrest?

“It is a shared language, a dialogue, that seems to guarantee a graspable world, a stable cosmos” says Walter H. Sokel, and continues, “[t]his language has to be spoken in such a way ‘as if everyone would (and could) expect it.’”<sup>109</sup> Josef K.’s cosmos is never stable, because meaning is never stable for Josef K. He is different than the court people who always anticipate the language. For them, there is never any gap between what is said and what is meant. Josef K., however, cannot command the language which would put things in place and assure that they stay where they belong. Here Sokel refers to a scene in *Description of a Struggle* where the child is amazed at how the two women can understand each other in such a smooth, uncomplicated and almost natural way:

“I heard ... [m]y mother...ask someone downstairs, in a natural tone: ‘What are you doing, my dear? It’s so hot.’ A woman answered from the garden: I am having high tea in the green [garden].’ They said that without reflecting and without undue distinctness, as if everyone would have to expect it.”<sup>110</sup>

That is exactly what Josef K. lacks, the ability to always already anticipate the language. Josef K. never knows what he is expected to have known. No statement is ever crystal clear to him. He always misunderstands and is always misunderstood. Yet he is persistently expected to have known the language. It becomes easier to see why Josef K. always and without any exception misses the correct or the intended meanings once we take into account that being in language, in the crudest sense, may mean having agreed

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<sup>105</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 12

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Sokel, Walter H. “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 366

<sup>110</sup> qtd. in Ibid.

to the correct or intended meanings of words. To put it differently, truth does not reside in the word itself. The *truth* of the *true* meaning of the word does not originate in the world or in the word. “It is the presence of the ‘trace’ of that community which makes the names of things ‘truthful.’”<sup>111</sup> It emerges only from out of relations that are always already set by the community. Words are truthful only because and to the extent that the community agrees to assume that they all mean the same thing when they utter this particular word. Because “the world receives meaning literally from the consensus of the community which bestows the ‘truthful’ names on things”, the meaning/the true meaning of that particular word is such and such only, and not otherwise.<sup>112</sup> Without being a member of such a community of a language, one is left with no choice but to try to calculate the true meaning of the words, only to see that his trials are doomed to fail, and that he is never to hit the correct meaning. This is why Josef K.’s words are [properly] heard by no ear. If you are not already a member of the community of speakers of a language, then you have to calculate and remember; you cannot know and act immediately. You have to wait before the door of language infinitely if you are not already in it. Entry already means you are outside, and thus, for you, there is no possibility of entering. It echoes the scientist that Benjamin refers to in *Some Reflections on Kafka*, standing on the threshold of a door, unable to pass through it due to his calculations of probabilities whereas the simple man, for whom such concerns or calculations do not exist, passes through the door as naturally as those women in the *Description of a Struggle* enjoy their dialogue. Just like the country man of *Before the Law*, the scientist waits and waits while “[h]e should consent ... and walk in rather than wait till all the difficulties involved in...are resolved.”<sup>113</sup>

As we soon see, Josef K. strives to manage this gap between his language and the language of the new world and the new community which the Court has introduced into his life. He constantly tries to bridge the gap. Not owning the words of this alien language, Josef K. is forced to invent his own words that are supposed to correspond to the unknown meanings of the unknown words of this new language. He has to make substitutions. One such example is when he recounts the morning’s events to Ms. Bürstner in order to apologize to her for disturbing her privacy:

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<sup>111</sup> Sokel, Walter H. “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 367

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 365

<sup>113</sup> qtd. in Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, p. 142

“‘But I have explained to you, Fräulein,’ said K., ... ‘that it was not I who interfered with your photographs; but since you don’t believe me I shall have to confess the investigating commission brought three bank employees here, and one of them...probably handled the photographs.’ ‘Yes, there was an investigating commission here,’ added K., since the Fräulein looked at him inquiringly. ...’But no, Fräulein,’ said K., ‘this is no joke. Why can’t you believe me? I have told you everything I know. Indeed, more than I know, because it wasn’t an investigating commission at all; I’m giving it that name because I don’t know what else to call it. Nothing was investigated. I was only put under arrest, but by a commission.’”<sup>114</sup>

Josef K. has to choose from among countless possibilities what those words that fly in the air in fact mean. A word might mean anything! And he is to be held responsible for his choices of meanings, which always turn out to be wrong. The reason why he has to choose is because *only he* sees multiple and different possibilities of meanings while for others it is always clear, and is to be taken for granted. Others understand the correct or intended meaning right away, naturally, without any hesitation, just like the women in *Description of a Struggle*. There is no other possibility of meaning for them, unlike Josef K. He is the one, in fact the only one, who always misses the correct meaning of words, always makes wrong choices as to what was in fact meant. We soon come to see that Josef K. is very much defined by this peculiarity.

#### a. Reading: The Silent Yes at the Eye of the Storm

*But what answers the call of literary reading is not a door falling open or becoming transparent or even getting a bit thinner. It is, rather, a ruder stone, better sealed, a crushing weight, an immense avalanche that causes the earth and sky to shudder.*

Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*

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<sup>114</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 20-21

Josef K. is faced with meaningless events, meaningless in the sense that Josef K. does not understand what is happening. He tries to, but he cannot comprehend the events taking place around him. Moreover he is unable to follow the explanations which he reaches here and there and which are supposed to render the happenings meaningful—at least to some degree—. But explanations do not explain anything, nor are they themselves any different than the events that they are supposed to account for. This is how Josef K. is surrounded by two layers of meaninglessness: what happens to him, or the events themselves on the one hand; and the alien language within which these meaningless happenings make sense, on the other. His own words fail to correspond to the new world he has just been introduced. Yet, he is faced with these brute facts anyhow. Meaningless as they may be, they stand right before him. Josef K. reacts to this meaninglessness in two ways, which could be thought of as the two faces of the same coin: He makes assumptions as to the possible explanations of the events, and then he refutes those which do not seem to be in line with the most up-to-date state-of affairs. And he makes assumptions as to meanings of the foreign words, and makes up his own words so that he can talk about those mysterious happenings. The most crucial element in both of these reactions is that they originate in him. The source of the made-up words or the assumptions is him, and him only. To put it differently, it is Josef K. himself who creates all those hypothetical causes and effects; all reasons behind his justifications and refutations; and finally, all his made up words and meanings which only make the lack of the correct meaning or language more and more apparent rather than make up for it. It is as if Josef K. acts out the *Prometheus* parable (written in January 1918):

*“Prometheus*

*There are four legends concerning Prometheus:*

*According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.*

*According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.*

*According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.*

*According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.*

*There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable.”<sup>115</sup>*

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<sup>115</sup> Kafka, Franz. “Prometheus” in *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. n. pag.

This extraordinary parable brings reading and writing together in the face of the meaningless mass of rock. The meaninglessness of the crude corporeality is part of what invites the trial to understand this very meaninglessness, to metamorphose it into something meaningful by creating a story for it in and through which it may make sense. Walter H. Sokel argues that the myth is the end product of the act of *reading*. “Here”, continues Sokel, “the desire to narrate forms a continuum with the need to understand—that is, to read.”<sup>116</sup> “[W]riting itself... becomes the search for significance that makes it a kind of reading. Writing and reading become interchangeable, a circular continuum, without a break between them.”<sup>117</sup> Four different legends, four different readings before the inexplicable rock:

“It is the wish to read meaning into enigmatic givenness that begets the myth. In terms of the parable, ‘writing’ is inseparable from reading. Together they form the attempt to understand what is simply there —the strangely shaped mountain range. The telling of tales is presented as an attempt to produce meaning.”<sup>118</sup>

The parable marks that *the inexplicable mass of rock* remains inexplicable and enchanting as ever, calling for new legends. As long as it stands there, it will invite and welcome those eyes that see it; and the eyes which see it, will always try to read it and understand it; and each reading will be a mis-reading, and each understanding a misunderstanding. Here the invitation of the mass of rock resembles the song of the Sirens, alluring and captivating. In Kafka’s *Silence of the Sirens* Odysseus escapes the Sirens by not seeing them, “all ... faded from his sight as he fixed his gaze on the distance, the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer.”<sup>119</sup> He shifts his gaze to beyond them; he does not look at them; he does not see them. Thus when they were closest to him, they no longer existed for him, nor did their song or silence. Yet, reading is the exact opposite. It is to look at the Sirens straight in the eye, welcome their song, and welcome the enchantment. And this is precisely what Josef K. does; he becomes a reader, and thus, an artist.

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<sup>116</sup> Sokel, W.H. “Kafka and Modernism” in *Approaches to Teaching Kafka's Short Fiction*. Ed. Richard T. Gray. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995. Rpt. in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka—New Edition*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010. p.49

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Kafka, Franz. “Silence of the Sirens” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

“Reading”, says Maurice Blanchot, “...welcomes, consents, says yes” to that call of the Sirens so to say.<sup>120</sup> The call that comes from the work itself which exists only after its call is received. For Josef K. the call comes from the court. However, it is crucial to underline that the call does not enjoy an independent and autonomous existence, rather, its existence is essentially tied to its being heard and received: “Doubtless there is a sort of call, but it can only come from the work itself. It is a silent call...which only reaches the reader’s ear because he answers it.”<sup>121</sup> And it is this welcoming of the call which “lifts the work to being.”<sup>122</sup> Blanchot’s account of the relationship between literary reading and the rising of work (from death) —“Lazare, Veni Foras”— proves very illuminating when think of the relationship between Josef K. and the court. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a great parallel between the way reading lets the work be, and the way Josef K. lets the court be. This constitutes the core reason why I argue that Josef K. is a reader, that he *reads* the court. The call only reaches the reader’s ear because he welcomes it, he answers it. This silent call has the strangest way of being. It both exists and does not exist before it is properly heard/ answered/ received. Its existence coincides with its receipt. Reading is nothing but to hear and answer this call. Blanchot continues, saying, “This call turns him away from ordinary relations and toward the space in whose proximity the reading, by abiding there, becomes the approach to the work [the court] and ...[a] welcome to the work’s [the court’s] generosity.... The reading is this abiding.”<sup>123</sup> One of the earliest examples of such welcoming of the call is when the supervisor notifies Josef K. of his arrest. Here we read a strange remark from the supervisor: “That’s what I had to communicate to you, I’ve done that, and I’ve also seen how you’ve taken it”, says the supervisor when he tells Josef K. that he is under arrest.<sup>124</sup> And he waits to see how Josef K. reacts to the call speaking through him: will he take it or not? Josef K. takes it, and says yes to the call of the court. The supervisor sees his abiding. Only after seeing that Josef K. receives the call is his mission completed, “That was my duty.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. p. 194

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 196

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>124</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 11

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12

Yet, the earliest example is undoubtedly the opening scene of the book, when Josef K. wakes up from his sleep into a new world:

“The cook...who brought him his breakfast every morning at eight o’clock did not come this time. That had never happened before. K. waited for a while and with his head on the pillow looked at the old lady who was observing him with a curiosity quite unusual for her, but then,...he rang the bell. Instantly there was a knock at the door and a man he had never before seen in the house came in.”<sup>126</sup>

The hush before the storm is in the air. Things are different than usual on that morning. The old lady most probably sees the warders, who will soon enough arrest Josef K., and whom Josef K. has not seen yet. Already she becomes transformed into something different in the world of the court, she now acts in an *unusual* way. We do not know whether the warders have just arrived at the house, or whether they have been there for some time, waiting for Josef K. to ring the bell. Yet, to assume that they have been waiting for a sign from Josef K. makes a curious reading which would also resonate with the immediacy of the knock at the door, and the appearance of the warders inside Josef K.’s bedroom. It is as if Josef K. has given the sign and they have taken it, and answer back. In a paradoxical way resembling that of the call which comes in to being only when it is heard (but in order to be heard it first has to exist), the court both already exists, and does not yet exist. Josef K. is both already on trial, and is not yet on trial. This is how and why these two gestures clash: “‘Who are you?’ asked K., starting to sit up in bed. But the man ignored the question, as if his appearance were to be accepted without query.”<sup>127</sup>

It is indeed quite significant that the novel opens with the waking up of Josef K.. It is as if Josef K. wakes up into the world of the court when he opens his eyes. Blanchot likens reading to stepping into another world:

“[t]here is in reading...something vertiginous that resembles the movement by which, going against reason, we want to open onto life eyes already closed. This movement is linked to desire which, like inspiration, is a leap: I want to read what is, however, not written [yet].”<sup>128</sup>

*The Trial* opens with this leap, Josef K.’s leap into the world of reading, his leap into becoming a reader. Josef K. wakes up as a different man than before. He has just woken up into a different world. It is as if he says *I want to read what is not written yet* [the court]. He listens to the song of the warders and accepts to be enchanted by it. He

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<sup>126</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 1

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 195

participates in that enchantment. In a fashion similar to the Prometheus parable, he reads the inexplicable and thus, writes his own legend. Reading, so argues Blanchot, “is a violent rupture: the passage from the world where everything has more or less meaning, where there is obscurity and clarity, into a space where, properly speaking, nothing has meaning yet.”<sup>129</sup> Reading, Blanchot says:

“demands of the reader that he enter a zone where he can scarcely breathe and where the ground slips out from under his feet—and even if, leaving aside these stormy approaches, reading still seems to be participation in that open violence, the work [the trial]—nonetheless, in itself it is tranquil and silent presence, the calm center of measureless excess, the silent yes at the eye of every storm.”<sup>130</sup>

It is as if Blanchot is rewriting Josef K.’s description of the empty assembly halls where the air is *hardly breathable* and where the windows open only to soot as opposed to fresh air:

“K. was too exhausted... He stood up shakily... could not stand upright. ... [H]e felt as if he were seasick. He thought he was on a ship plunging through heavy seas. It seemed to him as if water were surging against the wooden walls, a roar coming from the depths of the corridor like water flooding over, the corridor rocking sideways and the waiting clients falling and rising on either side.”<sup>131</sup>

Kafka writes the first chapter and the last chapter of *The Trial* in 1914, and continues to work on the novel throughout 1915. From 1916, after *The Trial*, we have an interesting short story, *A Dream*, barely more than a page. The protagonist is our Josef K. The text opens with the sentence “Josef K. was dreaming.”<sup>132</sup> Here is the dream: Josef K. feels like taking a walk on a beautiful day. He hardly takes a few steps than he finds himself at the cemetery. He has seen “a freshly heaped grave mound which he wanted to pause beside.”<sup>133</sup> While the grave mound was rising and falling in his vision he makes a sudden leap and falls right before the grave mound. Two men stand behind the grave, holding a gravestone. They place the gravestone when Josef K. reaches there. All of a sudden there appears a third man, an artist, who holds a pencil in his hand and draws figures in the air while coming towards Josef K. The artist writes the words HERE LIES on the gravestone, and looks at Josef K.. He tries to continue to write on the gravestone, but he cannot continue. He once again looks at Josef K.

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<sup>129</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 196

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 53

<sup>132</sup> Kafka, Franz. “A Dream” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

“[T]hey exchange helpless glances.”<sup>134</sup> And then starts the bell of the chapel nearby. “K. felt miserable because of the artist’ predicament, he began to cry.”<sup>135</sup> With great reluctance the artist engraves the letter J. “At long last K. understood him;...with all his fingers he dug into the earth...a great hole opened out...into which K. sank, wafted onto his back by a gentle current. And while he was already being received into the impenetrable depths” he sees his own name engraved on the gravestone.<sup>136</sup> “Enchanted by the sight, he woke up.”<sup>137</sup> Can we not think of this short piece as the true first chapter of *The Trial*, which opens with the scene when Josef K. has just woken up, and is still in the bed? This dream may be the dream that Josef K. was dreaming while he was asleep. We are justified to assume that he has dreamt his own death in that dream from which he has just woken up in *The Trial*, and only after having died his own death and having survived it does he become his own reader (and thus writer). This is important, because the call and the court, in other words reading begins right here. The violent rupture takes place in the dream. “[G]oing against reason”, Josef K. begins to read only after this dream.<sup>138</sup> Because he reads he becomes an artist.

We are not given much information about how the artist looks other than his pencil in his hand and cloths. We do know, however, that Josef K. and the artist look at each other, although Josef K., being too curious about the rest of the letters, “paid hardly any attention to the man” at first.<sup>139</sup> I suggest reading the artist as ‘Josef K. the Reader’, or as ‘Josef K. the Artist’, who *reads*, could add a lot to *The Trial*. The living Josef K. may have failed to recognize this new Josef K., who is an artist, because Josef K. the Artist is very different from him. Josef K. the Artist looks at the world quite differently, in fact so differently that the old Josef K. cannot even recognize himself or his own eyes. It is as if the one Josef K. who belongs to the world, enjoys the day, takes a walk, in other words who *lives* in the world has to be buried so that the artist Josef K. who is “clad only in trousers and a badly buttoned shirt; on his head was a velvet cap”, draws figures in the air—who, in short, does not seem to belong in the word as much as the other Josef K.— could *be/ exist*.<sup>140</sup> When we think of this dream in terms of the birth

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<sup>134</sup> Kafka, Franz. “A Dream” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 195

<sup>139</sup> Ibid

<sup>140</sup> Kafka, Franz. “A Dream” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

of Josef K. the Reader, or the artist, then the opening scene of *The Trial* becomes much more telling. Already before the novel begins Josef K. has become an artist. He has heard the call and has begun to *read*. Thus, when he opened his eyes on the day of the arrest into the world of the warders and the court, he had already stepped into the world of the court. “[G]oing against reason”, he had already left his other self buried in the grave, and had taken the *leap* into the world of reading.<sup>141</sup> Then he began to read, and thus write what was not yet written. He read, and thus wrote his legend just as in the Prometheus story. In a way, it is as if through reading, he becomes part of his own legend which he reads, and thus writes, and also lives. His metaphorical death in the dream marks this transformation he undergoes through reading; he is metamorphosed into language, and now belongs to another world than the world of the living.

## b. Entangled in the Text

*And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold here I am.*

Genesis 22:1

*“Even if I’ve come late, I am here now”*

Josef K.

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<sup>141</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 195

“Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.”<sup>142</sup> In his book *Franz Kafka*, W. H. Sokel underlines that “the German word for the arrest, *Verhaftung*, carries the additional meaning of entanglement and fatal attachment.”<sup>143</sup> It is as if all of a sudden Josef K. somehow gets entangled in the court, just like a fly stuck in a fly-paper. In fact the image of fly comes from the text itself. While Josef K. is being carried by the two executioners by the arms, we read these words: “He was reminded of flies wrenching their legs off in the struggle to free themselves from fly-paper.”<sup>144</sup> Without any doubt the most striking scene where Josef K. flies right into the court is when Josef K. answers the call of the priest when he is summoned by name by the priest in the cathedral. Sabine I. Gözl describes this scene as the perfect manifestation of Althusser’s *interpellation*. Here Gözl puts emphasis on Josef K.’s turning his head around to look at the priest who addresses him by his name, and likens Josef K.’s turning to the physically turning around which Althusser mentions in his theory of interpellation and subjecthood:

“I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects from among the individuals, or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace police hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else).”<sup>145</sup>

The word is *recognition*. The individual *hears* the call and simultaneously he recognizes that the call is for him. Taking the call upon him, the individual is now transformed into something different. He now enjoys a new kind of being or existence. His bodily move declares that he hears the call, and confirms that it is him and him only, who is called. Throughout *The Trial* Josef K.’s case is exactly like what Althusser describes here. In fact, in the novel Josef K. is not hailed only once. He is not hailed, for example, in such a way that the interpellation occurs once and for all, and absorbs him forever. Rather Josef K. is called quite more than once, for example he is called by the warders and the

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<sup>142</sup> Kafka, *Franz Kafka: Der Prozeß*. DigBib.Org: Die Freie Digitale Bibliothek. Web. July 11, 2011. The URL: <[www.digbib.org/Franz\\_Kafka\\_1883/Der\\_Prozess](http://www.digbib.org/Franz_Kafka_1883/Der_Prozess)>

<sup>143</sup> Sokel, *Franz Kafka*, p.15

<sup>144</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 175

<sup>145</sup> Althusser qtd. in Gözl, Sabine I. *The Split Scene of Reading: Nietzsche/ Derrida/ Kafka/ Bachmann*. New Jersey: Humanities Press International Inc., 1998. p. 119

supervisor, and he is called by the phone for the first session, and he is called when he is watching theatre etc. Josef K. responds to these calls, and he responds each time by taking a further step into the world of the court. This scene in the cathedral, where he turns his head to the direction of the call of the priest, who also belongs to the court as he soon reveals, is in some way more peculiar than the others. Here we have unusual descriptions of Josef K.'s stream of thought:

“He had almost left the pew area and was approaching the open space between this and the entrance doors when he heard the priest’s voice for the first time. A powerful, practiced voice. How it pierced the expectant cathedral! But it was not directed at a congregation. It was unambiguous and there was no escape; he was calling: ‘Josef K.!’ K. stopped abruptly and stared at the floor. For the time being he was still free, he could walk on and make his way from there through one of the three small dark wooden doors not far in front. That would show he had not understood, or that he had indeed understood but was taking no notice. But if he turned round he was caught, for then he was admitting he understood very well, that he was really the person called for, and that he would comply. If the priest had called out again, K. would certainly have walked on but, as everything remained quiet all the time he waited, he turned his head slightly to see what the priest was doing now. He [the priest] was standing motionless in the pulpit as before, but it was obvious he had noticed the movement of K.’s head.”<sup>146</sup>

These words call for more attention: *For the time being he was still free, but if he turned round he was caught*. The narrator seems to know what Althusser is talking about already. The narrator invites the reader to think that Josef K. is calculating whether or not he should or would recognize that the call is indeed for him. As for Josef K. himself, we do not know what he really thinks, or whether he is aware that he will be caught if he turns round. It is as if the narrator is translating for the reader what Josef K.’s actions—whether he is ignorant or aware of them—mean in the language of the court. In that language if he hears the call, and responds to it, the call becomes meant for him. This relationship between Josef K. and the call again resembles the relationship between the inexplicable mass of rock and the legends of Prometheus. Josef K. sees the court, and there the court is.

However, the scene gets even stranger when the priest, whose call was *unambiguous*, asks Josef K., “Are you Josef K.?” as if in order to confirm that his call *was* ambiguous, and he would not recognize that it was Josef K. if Josef K. had chosen to simply walk away, refusing the call. Such a question from the priest does not go hand in hand with the precision of the court. After all, the priest is part of the court. The

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<sup>146</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 163

priest, and therefore the court, and also the call may not be aiming Josef K. that directly and personally. Josef K. answers, saying “Yes,” to the priest’s question.<sup>147</sup> Immediately after Josef K.’s yes comes the priest’s sentence, “You are accused,”; “Yes,” K. answers again. “Then you are the one I am seeking.”<sup>148</sup> Only after these questions and confirmation does the priest unite the call and Josef K.

Another similar scene is when Josef K. goes to the first session of the trial. Although until then everything seems to have been arranged for Josef K. in a very personal and careful way, here a drastic void opens. The examining magistrate does not recognize Josef K.: “‘Right,’ said the examining magistrate, who was leafing through the book and now turned to K. with the air of making an assessment: ‘You are an interior decorator?’”<sup>149</sup> Without any doubt, what follows this mis-recognition is as bizarre as the cathedral scene. Josef K. explains that he is not an interior decorator but an administrator at a bank, and after this clarification, he goes on, saying:

“Your question, sir, as to whether I am an interior decorator — or rather, you didn’t ask, you told me so outright — typifies the whole nature of these proceedings instituted against me. You may object that these are not proceedings at all. You are absolutely right, for they are only proceedings if I recognize them as such. But I do recognize them for now, for the moment anyway, out of pity, so to speak.”<sup>150</sup>

This answer of Josef K. cries out loudly that he already knows that he is reading, that he has heard the call and thus given life to it, and by doing that, given life to the trial. Josef K. already knows everything, yet, *against reason* as Blanchot had beautifully put it, becomes his reader anyhow. Knowing that the proceedings might end once he does not recognize them does not change much for Josef K. He *continues* to recognize them as proceedings still, and participates “in that open violence”, as Blanchot puts it —which, as I will soon discuss, is very much the trial of any reader of *The Trial*.<sup>151</sup>

Judith Butler in her article “Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All” explains that this turning round that Althusser explains is more than a physical response to a call that wants you to turn round only. Rather this gesture is the assurance that the call has been heard *properly*, and that the hailing is complete. This is why it is significant to note that the narrator makes sure that we understand that the priest recognizes that Josef

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 164

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p. 31

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, p. 32

<sup>151</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 196

K. has turned his head to look at him: "He [the priest] was standing motionless in the pulpit as before, but it was obvious he had noticed the movement of K.'s head."<sup>152</sup> If we go back to the very first pages of the novel when Josef K. sees the warders in his bedroom, and learns that he is under arrest; the supervisor who comes to Josef K.'s room to notify him of his arrest utters very alike sentences: "You are under arrest, that's all. That's what I had to communicate to you, I've done that, and I've also seen how you've taken it."<sup>153</sup> This gesture, Butler claims, does not emerge independently of its hearer, which is very much in line with how recognizing the inexplicable, seeing it as such, breathes life into it and begets the legends, just as in the Prometheus parable.

"The one who turns around in response to the call does not respond to a demand to turn around. The turning around is an act that is, as it were, conditioned both by the "voice" of the law and by the responsiveness of the one hailed by the law. The "turning around" is a strange sort of middle-ground (taking place, perhaps, in a strange sort of "middle-voice") that is determined both by the law and the addressee, but by neither unilaterally nor exhaustively. Although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn."<sup>154</sup>

What Butler emphasizes here echoes Blanchot's remark that the call "only reaches the reader's ear because he answers it."<sup>155</sup> It is not only the call that is alluring; the ear is already allured so that it can hear the song of the Sirens. Neither the call nor the ear can *unilaterally* or *exhaustively* account for the enchantment which emerges out of their unification. They must find each other first, or else there will not be any call or any Josef K. to hear the call.

Recognizing his trial as a trial, Josef K. opens the door of a different world. After stepping through the threshold of this door, things metamorphose into very different things. He gets entangled in language. Antony Thorlby argues that Josef K. is guilty only of "bad grammar", "mislead by language"; adds that, "[h]is basic mistake is a tiny, prepositional one."<sup>156</sup> "Prepositions", he explains, "are the smallest words which establish the most fundamental relationships: in this case, the relationship of these supposed things to K.— that is, what he is guilty 'of', and what his trial is 'about'."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 163

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

<sup>154</sup> Butler, Judith. "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All" *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): p. 7

<sup>155</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 196

<sup>156</sup> Thorlby, p. 27

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*.

Thorlby argues that fundamentally Josef K. is “misled by the way he thinks about it [the trial].”<sup>158</sup> He analyzes the German words of the original text and explains that Josef K. transforms the words into different words, and “alter[s] the narrative” as the priest protests.<sup>159</sup> “The nouns ‘law’ and ‘court’” he explains, “sound as if they refer to real things; but these apparent substantives are (in German anyway) abstract concepts formed from verbs.”<sup>160</sup> Yet, Josef K. takes them literally, as if they do designate an independently existing entity. On hearing the call of reading and responding to it, Josef K. transforms a process, which only means that “something is going on in K.’s life, as in all of us, which may make it ‘a trial’; but it does not follow that this trial is a legal one.”<sup>161</sup> It is Josef K. thanks to whom *Der Prozeß*, or a process becomes *the trial*. It is such small words that entangles him in language; transforming a process into his trial. He makes assumptions and these assumptions turn into reality soon after. Without any doubt the most essential word of the novel is *law*. Even this foundational word is not stable enough. In fact it is this very word that lies at the core of *The Trial’s* ambiguity. *Gesetz* points at making assumptions. The word for *law* in German, *Gesetz*, “carries overtones that suggest something is only being ‘assumed’.”<sup>162</sup> “But take an assumption literally, as real, and it acquires the solidity of what is ‘laid down’—of what is the case, of law, in fact.”<sup>163</sup> Yet, taking the assumptions literally is the only way, for both Josef K., Kafka and us, the readers, to make way for our *reading*. “Thus,” Thorlby continues, “Kafka describes K.’s case, indeed his whole story, with a word that means perhaps no more than that something is going on: namely, a *Prozeß*, a process.”<sup>164</sup> But when Josef K. says *Der Prozeß*, it is no more an ordinary process in any one’s life. This process now means his trial. He assumes that “his life constitutes a case, and his case a trial, that he is being tried for something, by somebody, and according to some code of law.”<sup>165</sup> His only mistake is this. Being called to read, Josef K. assumes and thus, writes his own trial.

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<sup>158</sup> Thorlby, p. 26

<sup>159</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 168

<sup>160</sup> Thorlby, p. 26

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

But what if Josef K. did not become an artist who, *going against reason*, wants to read? What if Josef K. acted precisely like Kafka's Odysseus in *Silence of the Sirens*, and became deaf to the enchanting call of reading? We may deduce that the meaninglessness of the mass of rock, or Josef K.'s trial may not *be* if and when there were no eyes that see it to be lacking meaning. In other words the whole process might have ended without even starting if Josef K. had not been a reader. To claim that the trial would definitely turn nonexistent if Josef K. were deaf to the call, and simply ignored the whole process would be too clear-cut, which would not be very much in line with the general structure of the work. Such an argument would at least have to require that we assume in a persistent manner that in the next chapter Josef K. would not find himself entangled once again by the court. Such an assurance, however, is not to be found easily—if at all—in Kafka texts anyhow. Even though it would be too daring to argue that the trial would definitely end if Josef K. could avert his gaze when he was exposed to the trial, the possibility that the whole *process* may actually end, still stands as a quite powerful and significant alternative. Against all odds, we still have enough clues which hint at this possibility, and we must not disregard this new alternative way of seeing things. Just like the complications of passing through a door exist only for the scientist and not for the simple man, the inexplicable may indeed *be/exist* only for the eye which sees it, and thus gives it being.

Let me now turn to the fragment from *The Trial* titled “To Elsa”, which Kafka decides not to include in the novel. It is a lethal fragment, a “radical rupture from the ‘trial’”. It offers an alternative for Josef K. —not only for Josef K. but also for the reader as well, which I will soon explore deeper—, an alternative that would end all his trouble, and thus put an end to the novel. What if Josef K. did not hear the call of the court? What if he were simply deaf to this enchanting call? What if he refused *der Prozeß* altogether? What if Josef K. refused to be *entangled by the process*? The decision traced in the fragment “To Elsa” would not only lead Josef K. away from the court; but, having done so, it would also lead “the writing process away...from the very possibility of the novel with that title”; it “would have amounted to abandoning the writing of that novel altogether”, so argues Sabine I. Gözl.<sup>166</sup> If “To Elsa” were included in the novel, it might be the end of *The Trial*. In the Elsa fragment Josef K. is called by telephone “to appear immediately at the law court offices”, but he chooses to make plans of going to

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<sup>166</sup> Gözl, Sabine I. *The Split Scene of Reading* p. 102-121

the bar to see Elsa in the evening.<sup>167</sup> Josef K. asks what if he were not to come, and the voice on the phone answers, “We’ll know how to find you”:<sup>168</sup>

“And will I be punished for failing to come of my own free will?” asked K. and smiled in anticipation of what he would hear. “No,” was the reply. “Splendid,” said K., “but then what possible reason do I have to comply with today’s summons?” ... He drove directly to Elsa without delay. Leaning back comfortably in the corner of the cab... He meditated with a certain satisfaction on the fact that if the court was truly in session, he was causing it no small difficulty. He hadn’t said clearly whether or not he would appear in court; thus the judge was waiting, perhaps the entire assembly was waiting; K. alone would fail to appear, to the particular disappointment of the gallery. Unperturbed by the court, he was heading exactly where he wanted to go. For a moment he couldn’t be sure that he hadn’t absentmindedly given the driver the court’s address, so he called out Elsa’s address loudly to him; the driver nodded, he had been given no other. From then on K. gradually forgot about the court, and thoughts of the bank began to occupy him fully once more, as in earlier times.<sup>169</sup>

This *what if* is crucial because it opens up a new possibility for Josef K. With asking the question *what if* he has created the possibility of not hearing the call. And then he even confirms that he will not be punished for refusing to be hailed. After all when one of the two essential parts is missing, then the enchantment of the call cannot exist as Butler explains. We must have both the call which *reaches the reader’s ear only because he answers it*, and also the reader who is already enchanted enough to hear the call at the same time. If the reader no longer hears the call, then the call cannot exist, because its life is dependent on being heard. When the call does not exist, there cannot be any punishment since the absence of the call might be thought of as being equal to the absence of the court. After creating the alternative of not going to the court, or, to echo Josef K.’s own words from the first session, deciding *not to recognize the court as such*, Josef K. is now *unperturbed by the court*. He goes *directly* to Elsa, and while in the taxi he leans back *comfortably*: “From then on” K. gradually forgot about the court, and thoughts of the bank began to occupy him fully once more, as in earlier times.<sup>170</sup> Once exorcising the court, Josef K. slowly returns to his old way of life. He forgets the call of the court, and the trial and all the proceedings; instead his usual worries as to his work replace them. From then on, Josef K. ceases to read. He goes back being the Josef K.

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<sup>167</sup> Kafka, *The Trial: A New Translation Based on the Restored Text*. Trans. Breon Mitchell. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1998. Web. *n. pag.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

who has not died in *A Dream*. He goes back to being the *living* —as opposed to *reading*— Josef K. once again.

Butler draws attention to the immediacy that the call demands, and says:

“The one addressed is compelled to turn toward the law prior to any possibility of asking a set of critical questions: Who is speaking? Why should I turn around? Why should I accept the terms by which I am hailed?”<sup>171</sup>

Once this compulsion is broken by the question *what if* then the call becomes paralyzed, the whole process gets disturbed. “[B]ut then what possible reason do I have to comply with today's summons?”<sup>172</sup> After this question the whole chain breaks loose, and the court disappears gradually from K.’s mind.

Even a further step for Josef K. would be to ask what if the call and the trial is *not* for him. In other words, what if the call is not intended for him but somebody else, i.e. an interior decorator for whom the examining magistrate mistakes Josef K. for? What if he is not the addressee? Could the call of the trial be fake? In other words, what if the call does not originate from the court, but only from Josef K. himself? Is it only Josef K.’s illusion that the trial is calling him? After all the priest warns him, saying, “You are deceiving yourself about the court”, and explains the illusion enveloping the court: “In the introductory writings to the law, that *deception* is presented in this way”, and so he begins to tell the story of the doorkeeper to Josef K. [*italics mine*].<sup>173</sup> The priest’s remarks as to the deceit concerning the court are like the final and the most explicit warning Josef K. could receive. Heinz Politzer in his book *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* underlines that the priest tells Josef K. the story of the doorkeeper “to prove to K. that he is deluding himself about the Court. ...Since K. is told the story so that he may learn through it the delusion under which he is laboring with regard to his Trial.”<sup>174</sup> It is as if the priest is correcting Josef K., and telling straightforwardly that there is no call, and that he is deceiving himself about the court: “...I belong to the court,” said the priest, ‘so why should I want anything of you? The court asks nothing of you. It receives you when you come and it releases you when you go.’<sup>175</sup> Despite such candid remarks Josef K. does not break the illusion.

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<sup>171</sup> Butler, p. 7

<sup>172</sup> Kafka, *The Trial: A New Translation* n. pag.

<sup>173</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 166

<sup>174</sup> Politzer, Heinz. *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1966. p. 174

<sup>175</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 173

Kafka's parable titled *Abraham* could prove very illuminating here. The parable presents *another* Abraham who hesitates before the call. This two-and-a-half-page parable tells the story of an Abraham who, unlike the Abraham who is the father of faith, cannot ever be sure that it is *him* who is called. "I could conceive of another Abraham for myself"<sup>176</sup>, says Kafka, and so he conceives:

"[T]ake another Abraham. One who wanted to perform the sacrifice altogether in the right way... but could not believe that he was the one meant, he, an ugly old man, and the dirty youngster that was his child. True faith is not lacking to him, he has this faith; he would make the sacrifice in the right spirit if only he could believe he was the one meant. He is afraid that after starting out as Abraham with his son he would change on the way into Don Quixote."<sup>177</sup>

Kafka's Abraham puts quotation marks around the call, and questions for whom it is meant. For this Abraham there is the possibility that the call, although it is he who hears it, could be meant for somebody other than himself. Kafka's Abraham is afraid that he might be deluding himself that it is he who is called: "He is afraid that after starting out as Abraham with his son he would change on the way into Don Quixote."<sup>178</sup> The mentioning of Don Quixote makes it impossible not to refer to another Kafka parable here, *The Truth About Sancho Panza*:

"Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits."<sup>179</sup>

Don Quixote is Sancho Panza's demon whom Sancho Panza is striving to avoid by telling stories which sets him off from one adventure to another. Abraham is afraid that he might be doing exactly what Sancho Panza is doing, that is, he might be setting himself on an adventure by thinking that the call is calling him. From another point of view this is also precisely what the priest warns Josef K. about: he might be deceiving himself, and believing that he is being called when the court does not want anything of him. What if the call were not for him, and he was only being Sancho Panza? Just like Josef K., who asks what if he did not show up in the court office in *To Elsa* chapter, Kafka's Abraham asks a very similar question: What if the call is not meant to call *me*. Yet, Josef K. never asks this question; rather he makes the leap of assumption. He

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<sup>176</sup> Kafka, Franz. "Abraham" in *Franz Kafka: Parables and Paradoxes in German and English*. Trans. N/A. New York : Schocken Books, 1961. p. 43

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Kafka, Franz. "The Truth About Sancho Panza" in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

assumes that the court is calling *him* in spite of many occurrences or remarks which all say one and the same thing: He is deluding himself about being called by the court. If he could not make assumptions but instead be stuck with the question what if the court is not calling him, his end would probably be like Kafka's Abraham whose waiting for the answer to the question whether it is he who is being called would sentence him to lifelong hesitation before the call, not very unlike the waiting of the countryman before the door of the law. However, Josef K. does not get stuck with such possibilities. Although he does mention that he may not be the one who was meant to be arrested, he does not really consider this possibility: "[P]erhaps the order had been given to arrest some interior decorator who is just as innocent as I, but they came for me."<sup>180</sup> It is as if Josef K. says "Behold, *here I am*", but as "an Abraham who...come[s] unsummoned!"<sup>181</sup> When he comes the court only takes him in, just like the priest says. "There is no room for mistake", just like the warders underline when they arrest Josef K., because Josef K. and gets *entangled* in the court himself by acting on his assumptions.<sup>182</sup> "Our authorities", says one of the warders, "do not go in search of guilt in the population but are, as it says in the law, drawn to guilt...This is law."<sup>183</sup> We could translate the warder's words in the following way: The *only* law is to receive those who come and release them when they go. What matters is not truth of the call or the court, but Josef K.'s own assumptions as to their truth. While Kafka's Abraham cannot act but becomes paralyzed by the possibility that he is not the addressee of the call, no such possibility occurs to Josef K. He assumes that there is a court, that he is on trial, and that the law is calling him. Therefore, what the law does is only to receive him.

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<sup>180</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 34

<sup>181</sup> Kafka, Franz. "Abraham" in *Franz Kafka: Parables and Paradoxes* p. 45

<sup>182</sup> Kafka, *The Trial* p. 5

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 2. READING *THE TRIAL*:  
THE READER UNDER ARREST

*[I]t is not so much we who read Kafka's words, it is they  
who read us. And find us blank.*

George Steiner, *No Passion Spent*

So far I have argued that Josef K., having died and being born again as a reader, hears the call of the court, welcomes it and thus lets his trial be. In other words, the court or the trial does not lead an autonomous life, independent of Josef K.'s answer. I have tried to sketch how Josef K. responds to the call of his trial, and trace what could happen if he responded differently. Now I would like to take a further step, and explore how the reader of Josef K. responds when s/he finds him/herself before *The Trial*. In this chapter, I will focus on the experience of reading *The Trial*. I will argue that as long as the reader reads *The Trial*, *The Trial* receives him/her just like the law receives Josef K. when he comes. Although Josef K. does acknowledge that he may not be the one intended by the court, he still assumes the role or the responsibility to face the law even if he says he is speaking only for those who may find themselves in the same situation as himself, "I speak here for those, not for myself."<sup>184</sup> Once Josef K. gets entangled in—in other words, arrested by—the court he reads his trial into a *Prozeß*. Josef K. does not really pay attention to the possibility that it may not be his trial; rather he always

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<sup>184</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 33

assumes that it is, and he acts on his assumptions. Unlike Kafka's Abraham who is paralyzed by the thought *what if* the call does not call him even if he is the one who hears it, Josef K. passes over this possibility with an affirmative assumption and flies into the next level thanks to the wings this assumption provides. In fact Kafka's Abraham and the man from the country in the parable *Before the Law* act in the same way. Both of them are waiting for the answer to their question. The *Abraham* parable reads, "he would make the sacrifice in the right spirit if only he could believe he was the one meant."<sup>185</sup> We could translate the sentence in the following way: Abraham would act once his question *what if* it is not him, get its answer. We can also deduce from the parable that if the question *what if* had not occurred to Abraham, again he would have acted. Once the question appears, then it demands its answer, and blocks the way until it receives it. The same applies to the man from the country as well: "Before the law stands a door-keeper. A man from the country comes to this door-keeper and asks for entry into the law."<sup>186</sup> The man *asks* admittance, he does not simply enter. When he asks, however, he never gets what he demands. If the man from the country had not been stuck with the admittance, and instead had assumed that he is already in the law then he would not be sentenced to waiting in front of the entrance. In startling contrast to the man from the country and Abraham, Josef K. acts in the exact opposite way. He does not want any assurance or any license, because he assumes he is already *in* the trial, not *before* it. I argue that the reader must act in the exact same way if/when reading *The Trial*. In order to read, or to continue to read, the reader must die a death similar to Josef K.'s in *A Dream*, and must affirm again and again with each word, that s/he is still reading. As long as the reader reads *The Trial*, s/he is not *before The Trial* any more, but already *in* it. The trial does not only call Josef K. but it also calls the reader. We may not hear, not answer the call of the work and thus, not read *The Trial*. That is surely a possibility. But then, *The Trial* would not be [written], just like Josef K.'s trial: "What is a book no one reads?" asks Blanchot, and answers, "[s]omething that is not yet written."<sup>187</sup> The reader must participate in *The Trial*, and let it be just like Josef K. lets his trial be. If the reader rejects the call of *The Trial*, then *The Trial* will cease to be, because just like Josef K.'s trial, *The Trial* does not exist as long as it is not read. Although in ink and paper *The Trial* exists, "it awaits the liberating decision, the

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<sup>185</sup> Kafka, Franz. "Abraham" in *Franz Kafka: Parables and Paradoxes* p. 43

<sup>186</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p. 166

<sup>187</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 193

‘Lazare, veni foras’” which only the reader can make.<sup>188</sup> *The Trial* calls its reader to be entangled in it, in other words, to be arrested by it.

### a. The Reader: The Liar

“Whoever reads Kafka”, says Blanchot, “is...forcibly transformed into a liar.”<sup>189</sup> Blanchot’s use of the word *forcibly* is significant; Kafka texts *demand* that the reader be a liar; “not a complete liar”, though.<sup>190</sup> The reader is only half guilty. It shares the blame with words. In fact it is the words themselves which force the reader to become a liar:

“Whoever reads Kafka is...forcibly transformed into a liar, but not a complete liar. That is the anxiety peculiar to his art .... We undergo the immediate experience of an imposture we think we are able to avoid, against which we struggle (by reconciling contradictory interpretations) — and this effort is deceptive, yet we consent to it, and this laziness is betrayal. Subtlety, shrewdness, candor, loyalty, negligence, are all equally the means to a mistake (a deception) that is in the truth of the words, in their exemplary power, in their clarity, their interest, their assurance, their power to lead us on, let us fall, pick us up again, in the unfailing faith in their meaning that does not permit one either to leave or to follow it.”<sup>191</sup>

The reader lies, yet words are not innocent either; they lie too. If one part of the *deception* is constituted by the lying reader, then the other part, in fact the bigger part, is brought about by the words themselves. Words are all we have but we cannot trust them. They leave us vulnerable and perplexed because everything seems to be possible. After all “[c]ontradiction does not reign in this world”, only ambiguity reigns:<sup>192</sup> “[E]ach word, each image, each story can signify its opposite —and the opposite of that

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 195

<sup>189</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandel. California: Stanford University Press, 1995. p. 4

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, p. 5

as well—.”<sup>193</sup> Blanchot underlines this ambiguity the text forces upon the reader: Neither can we cling to the words, nor can we abandon them totally. With the first sentence of *The Trial* we try to be reconciled with the text, to fit it into some kind of system so that we may anticipate and eliminate some possibilities the work might have in store for us. Yet these trials fall to pieces. The *name* of the system of law for example, is scattered everywhere in the work. Although the frequent use of the name makes the system—meaning any structure that offers logic and consistency—*seem* to be there, behind this façade stands a vast void. Here, everything is possible, any possibility is valid! The reader is thrown into the sea of infinite possibilities. If a word may signify its opposite, then how is the reader to know which one is the truth? In fact it is precisely because the reader cannot ever *know* that s/he must make assumptions, and continue to read only upon these assumptions. Although “[e]ach sentence says ‘interpret me’”, and this interpretation is a matter of life and death, the reader is left to his own in this lethal journey of meaning.<sup>194</sup> Each reader must take up the heavy weight of making lethal assumptions, and follow them only to wind up in falsehood. As you may already guess, this world is very similar to that of Josef K. The structure of the work is such that it demands from its reader what it had demanded from Josef K., that is, the *Prozeß* is not only Josef K.’s trial, but also the reader’s.

The readers’ trials to read *The Trial* explode into interpretations, which result in a potentially infinite number of legends like the ones that the *Prometheus* parable suggests. The infinite possibilities of reading *The Trial* only point to its inexplicability. “True reading remains impossible” in Kafka, and once truth is taken away we are left only with assumptions.<sup>195</sup> These assumptions, which we may also call interpretations, give birth to as many unique legends as their readers. Each reading produces its own unique legend. Such an infinite possibility of reading resembles the infinite number of possibilities that Josef K. becomes exposed to in the face of the inexplicable, which is the court. *The Trial* is inexplicable to the reader as much as the trial or the court is inexplicable to Josef K. As I have already discussed, these possibilities do not prevent Josef K. from entering into the court because he makes assumptions and acts on them as if they are truth. Josef K. assumes that he is already in the trial. The reader of Josef K.

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<sup>193</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *The Work of Fire*, p. 9

<sup>194</sup> Adorno, Theodor. “Notes on Kafka” in *Prisms*. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981. Rpt. in in *Modern Critical Views: Franz Kafka*. ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, p. 96

<sup>195</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 4

must do the same; it must assume that s/he is already in *The Trial* and let *The Trial* receive him/her, just like the law receives Josef K. The reader must accept the deception that is in the truth of the words. In other words, the reader must deceive him/herself in the same manner as Josef K. does with respect to his trial, and assume that this deception is truth. In that sense the word *deception* is crucial; the reader does not have to believe that the deception is true, s/he only has to believe that it is necessary if his/her trial, or reading, is to take place. The reader must accept one and the same law Josef K. accepts, that is, you must make assumptions and act on them as if they are truth. The reader must lie if the reading is to take place, and must read *The Trial* in the same way that Josef K. reads his trial so that the work can acquire existence. Reading is to hear the silent call of the work and say yes to it. It is thus becoming Josef K. and welcoming *The Trial*, and letting it be, “each time the first and each time the only.”<sup>196</sup> “Kafka has no story to tell”, says David I. Grossvogel, and he adds, “he conveys a mood, an anxiety—his anxiety.”<sup>197</sup> *The Trial* is not a book, but the anxiety itself. The anxiety performs itself in and through *The Trial*, and vice versa, *The Trial* lets the anxiety manifest itself. In that sense, to read *The Trial* is not to read yet another book, just as Blanchot suggests, “[t]o read a poem is not to read yet another poem.”<sup>198</sup>

“The reading of a poem is the poem itself, affirming itself in the reading as a work. It is the poem giving birth, in the space held open by the reader, to the reading that welcomes it; it is the poem becoming the power to read.”<sup>199</sup> Reading *The Trial* is the action, the gesture, the *Prozeß* itself. Each reader opens a unique space in which the work becomes alive, and it is in and through this space that the work performs itself:

“[T]he book which has its origin in art has no guarantee in the world, and when it is read, it has never been read before. It does not come into its presence as a work except in the space opened by this unique reading, each time the first and each time the only.”<sup>200</sup>

If reading is participation in the open violence, that is the work, as Blanchot suggest, then that participation demands that the reader become a liar. I suggest that the reader becomes a liar only after dying a death similar to Josef K.’s death in *A Dream* which makes it possible for him to be reborn as a reader. This means that the resurrection of

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<sup>196</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 194

<sup>197</sup> Grossvogel, p. 184

<sup>198</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 198

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, p. 202

the work demands the birth of the individual as a reader. In other words, the resurrection work demands the death of the individual so that s/he can be reborn as a reader and give life to it. The reader takes part in the work's journey from absence to presence. As a matter of fact, this resurrection is made possible only thanks to the reader. The work does not exist separately from its reader. Rather the reader lets the work be liberated, and become alive just like Jesus brings Lazarus back from death. The work is dead without the reader, it does not exist. In that aspect, reading "evokes the divine aspect of creation."<sup>201</sup> In that sense the reader is like an artist. Consequently, what threatens reading the most would be to refuse to die and thus, refuse to deny the truth of that individual—which may very well be thought of as refusing to lie—. Here I slightly alter the meaning of the word *liar*, and use it in a more comprehensive and different way than Blanchot, but I think the essential point still holds and this altered meaning sheds a different light on the discussion of the lying of the reader. First of all, to lie means to accept the delusion that assumption is truth itself. Taking assumption as truth could be thought of as a kind of lying because you act as if you *know* when you do not in fact know. When those assumptions turn out to be wrong, as in the case of Josef K., you are thrown only further away from truth. Secondly, we can think of the death Josef K. dies in his dream in the parable *A Dream* is a perfect manifestation of Josef K.'s refusal of the truth of the pre-death individual who belongs to the world, as opposed to the post-death reader who now exists in a different mode. Although after the death Josef K. becomes a different person than before, —he has become a reader now— we could still think of it as a refusal of the old self. In a way the new self turns its back on the older one and acts as if it did not exist. Because becoming a reader would necessitate that the reader self denies the pre-death self, this might also count as lying. With this connections established, it becomes apparent that in terms of becoming a reader, to die and to lie are essentially related. To refuse to die is to persist in being the same individual and staying in the world, whereas to die is to be born again in a different mode of existence. W. H. Sokel describes this new mode of being as becoming literary language, or a linguistic figure.<sup>202</sup> He says, "[t]o become literary language, the self has to die to this life, as Josef K. has to die in his dream, if the artist's immortalizing script is to be completed on his grave."<sup>203</sup> I offer to add a new item to the equation above: To

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<sup>201</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 197

<sup>202</sup> Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka", p. 379

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p. 381

become a *reader* the self has to die to this world, and is to become a linguistic being. Staying in this world and judging the work with the logic thereof block the way to reading, and thus the way to existence of the work. “[T]he reader’s reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads”, says Blanchot is “what most threatens reading.”<sup>204</sup> Such an approach is not in line with literary reading because the work and the reader do not coincide in the same mode of being. In fact, since that individual has not yet died and been born as a reader who could give life to the work, the work does not even exist yet. Therefore according to this perspective the work either does not exist, or it is assumed to have a life independent of its reader and thus, it already exists whether it is read or not. In that case, however, the work would not need its reader, neither would *The Trial* demand of its reader to become a liar. Then the so-called reader could continue to be *firmly rooted in existence* in the world, and thus would not have to die. “A reading which takes the work for what it is...does not consist in introducing, in his place, a reader – a person firmly rooted in existence, having a history, a profession, a religion.”<sup>205</sup> These features all point to the existence in this world where one is troubled by daily worries. Yet the mode of existence that literary reading requires is very different from this earthly mode. In sharp contrast to the so-called or fake reader of earthly life, the real reader does not own such features. Rather the reader who exists in language is “always fundamentally anonymous.”<sup>206</sup> “He is any reader, none in particular, unique but transparent.”<sup>207</sup> *The Trial* could only receive such a reader because only that reader can accept *the deception* and assume that s/he is already in *The Trial*, and thus, let *The Trial* be.

Having taken a closer look at the reader’s role in *the deception*, I now will turn to the guiltier half, that is, the words themselves. I will try to analyze the form and the narrative structure of *The Trial* and answer the question how the text is able to arrest not only its protagonist but also its reader. All of a sudden we find ourselves as lost as Josef K., and try to make sense of the world and the words that we are exposed to. However, our efforts fail because familiar words now seem to have become unfamiliar. It is as if we are living in flesh and blood the very first scene in which Josef K. wakes up to find in his bedroom the warders who make fun of Josef K.’s words about his breakfast. Josef

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<sup>204</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 198

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid*.

K.'s words now have become words to be laughed at when they are uttered by the mouths of the warders. The same transformation occurs to us, too. Words do not carry us smoothly, rather they let us fall, and pick us up only to let us fall again as Blanchot says. Although they are our only guide in this world, they do not guide us anywhere. They guide us to nowhere precisely because they point at all directions at once. We get stuck with each word. Each word becomes an obstacle and blocks the way. As I have discussed earlier, Josef K. and the warders do not hear each other's words *properly*. Although they utter the same words, they speak different languages because meanings of their words never coincide. In a similar way we try to decipher the language to which the text exposes us. Yet this task is as impossible as Josef K.'s trials to find the correct, or the intended, meanings of the words that he encounters. What the words mean turn into a question which can be answered with infinite number of possibilities, which in turn renders it unanswerable. "What makes our effort to read so full of anguish", says Blanchot in "Reading Kafka", "is not the coexistence of different interpretations; it is the mysterious possibility of seeming sometimes to have a negative meaning, sometimes a positive one."<sup>208</sup> And this is the reason why we cannot trust words. They are such that they can both mean and not mean at the same time. In that case we must at once believe and not believe them. "[R]eading Kafka", says F. Jameson, "plunges us into a well-nigh interminable weighing of alternatives, a tireless back and forth between the pro and the contra, each of which then unfolds into its interminable consequences, and so on."<sup>209</sup> What happens on the level of words sheds its shade upon the situations which those tentative words give life in and through themselves. The effect of the possibility that a word may and may not be telling what it seems to be telling is multiplied infinite times when these words describe any situation or an event. This is how the Kafkaesque situation is born. In "Kafka's Narrative: A Matter of Form", Antony Thorlby explores the mechanisms that render a situation *Kafkaesque* and starts out by laying down what we usually mean when we use the word "situation", and then traces how it turns Kafkaesque. He underlines that the word situation is mainly used "metaphorically to delineate an area or moment of experience."<sup>210</sup> In other words a situation "is not really there at all"; it does not exist independently on its own.<sup>211</sup> Rather,

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<sup>208</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire* p. 6

<sup>209</sup> Jameson, p. 96

<sup>210</sup> Thorlby, p.24

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

a situation is made up of a number of things such as feelings, ideas or events we experience *in conjunction with* one another.<sup>212</sup> “Thus”, says Thorlby, “a situation can be resolved by introducing more factors, or eliminating some, or by rearranging them all.”<sup>213</sup> However in Kafkaesque situation we miss the fundamental element that ties “a number of phenomena, factors of many kinds, such as persons and places, wishes and thoughts, things that have happened and others yet to come” together so that they “form a whole.”<sup>214</sup> That essential element is *the conjunction*. MacMillan Online Dictionary defines “conjunction” as “a word that is used to join other words, phrases, clauses, and sentences, for example ‘and’, ‘because’, and ‘but’” (Macmillan Online Dictionary). We do not know how things relate to each other or what kind of relationships hold between them; Josef K. knows even less than us. Thorlby argues that in Kafkaesque situation we “see this metaphorical activity going on —but without understanding what the connections are.”<sup>215</sup> Without the information as to how things connect with each other, we are left only with “a mass of bizarre details inexplicably brought together.”<sup>216</sup> We have already lost our trust in words; now we are rendered unable to connect those words flying all around us with each other so that we might see some sense this time in this bigger picture. Because the true relationships between things are withdrawn from us, and also from Josef K., and because we (both Josef K. and us) cannot *read* if there are no connections; we come to create our own connections. That is to say, we make assumptions and read as if they are truth only to see that they are always false. “Kafka’s vocabulary is one of inference and conjecture”, so says W. H. Sokel, and he adds, “[t]he only bridge between the protagonist and his environment is surmise”, in other words assumption.<sup>217</sup> This is true for us, as readers, as well. We must infer, and guess in order to re-connect things with each other again. The price we have to pay is no small deal. These replacement connections may be correct or wrong. If they are wrong, then that means we now have a different situation than the one we had been having trouble with. Just like we had not known the true connections between things in the first situation, we do not know if the replacement is correct or not when we are doing it. That is to say, in terms of increasing the probability of truth we have not gone even one step

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Thorlby, p. 24

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Sokel, *Franz Kafka*, p. 11

further. As a matter of fact, our assumptions always prove wrong just like Josef K.'s. We always discover one thing, and one thing only; that we were wrong. Yet we have to make them even if in the end we always discover that they were wrong.

Because the only bridge between us and *The Trial* is *surmise*, it is as fragile and tentative as the bridge that binds Josef K. to his trial. Strangely enough though, it is also as strong and unbreakable as it is weak and fragile. Such a statement would be a contradiction, but as Blanchot underlines, there is no room for it in Kafka. Indeed it cannot exist in Kafka's world because contradiction assumes that it is not possible that p and ~p exist simultaneously. Yet, in Kafka's world everything is possible. After all each word "can signify its opposite —and the opposite of that as well—. <sup>218</sup>" In that sense contradiction refuses to obey the one and only law in Kafka's world, which is to take assumption as truth. Thus, it is expelled. Assumption defies and dethrones contradiction, and crowns ambiguity instead. Since neither Josef K. nor we know the truth, we must content ourselves with assumptions. An assumption behaves like truth as long as you affirm your assumption that it is true. In a similar fashion, it ceases to be true once you no longer assume that it is true. In that case, an assumption in itself is neither true nor false. It is such that it can turn into one or the other anytime. As long as you assume that your assumption is true, then it becomes as strong and unshakeable as truth itself; and when you do not affirm that it is true anymore, then it becomes weak and fragile and breaks into pieces.

In his article "Parable and Paradox in Kafka's Stories", Alwin L. Baum argues that in Kafka's narratives "everything is a matter of appearance", and he adds, "Kafka's style is ...hypothetical, characterized by an interminable *vielleict* [perhaps]."<sup>219</sup> This *perhaps* is so overwhelming that it *forces* the reader to interpret, thus to deceive him/herself. "Through the power with which Kafka commands interpretation, he collapses aesthetic distance" says Adorno in "Notes on Kafka"<sup>220</sup>, and adds:

"He demands a desperate effort of the allegedly 'disinterested' observer of an earlier time, overwhelms him, suggesting that far more than his intellectual equilibrium depends on whether he truly understands; life and death are at stake. ... His texts are designed...to agitate his [the reader's] feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film."<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 9

<sup>219</sup> Baum, p. 153

<sup>220</sup> Adorno, p. 96

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

Kafka does not allow the reader of Josef K. to enjoy any higher status than Josef K. The reader must *interest* him/herself in each word, and constantly reaffirm his/her interest if reading is to take place. The reader is no longer on the safe side; in contrast, the reader is as much in danger as Josef K. This *desperate effort* to make sense burdens the reader with responsibility of the assumptions s/he makes, which reduces the reader to the same status as Josef K. Yet without that desperate and deadly effort no reading is possible. In other words, to read is to accept that it is a matter of life and death. Even if in rare occasions the reader gets to know a little bit more than the protagonist; that only makes things worse for the reader because then even more possibilities open up, which will not move the reader any further but only block the way. W. H. Sokel also underlines this point and claims that Kafka “take[s] away the reader’s fictional superiority over the protagonist.”<sup>222</sup> He explains how in the following way:

“Together with the protagonist, the reader is thrown into the basic condition of every individual man: He stays imprisoned in the solitary confinement of a limited and subjective consciousness that can only infer, but can never know, the external world.”<sup>223</sup>

We “experience the narrative” through “the solipsistic perspective” of Josef K.<sup>224</sup> We are confined to his assumptions as to the situations in which he finds himself. We do not have any other access to the events. We only experience things only after they are filtered through his perception. In fact it is not the events themselves that we learn about; rather it is how Josef K. experiences those events. In that sense the world of *The Trial* is mediated by Josef K.’s mind. We do have another mind, the narrator, but the narrator is neither consistent nor omniscient. Although it might at first seem to offer an alternative interpretation of situations K. finds himself in, soon enough we discover that the narrator takes us only to more untruth. Instead of providing us with a solid ground on which we can evaluate and judge not only the situations Josef K. encounters but also Josef K.’s own interpretations of them, the narrator makes our job only more difficult when we discover that the narrator too, is always wrong. That Josef K.’s perception is mediated by the narrator makes it as if there are two Josef K.s whose accounts are to be double-doubted now. We are twice removed from the true situation.

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<sup>222</sup> Sokel, *Franz Kafka*, p. 10

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, p.11

One such example when the narrator lets us fall, like Blanchot says of words, is when Josef K. is in the cathedral. While walking in the cathedral Josef K. hears the priest call his name. The scene of the call is described by the narrator only. We do not have Josef K.'s direct speech, and the earliest direct speech from the priest is his calling of the name and an exclamation mark, "Josef K.!"<sup>225</sup> We experience this crucial scene of calling through the narrator's words: "[H]e heard the priest's voice for the first time. A powerful, practiced voice. How it pierced the expectant cathedral! .... It was unambiguous and there was no escape; he was calling: 'Josef K.!'"<sup>226</sup> The narrator describes how this calling takes place almost in one page. The only external and objective data is the priest's calling of name Josef K.. But even the name cannot escape interpretation of the narrator because it is followed by an exclamation mark. The narrator not only tells us the gestures of Josef K. and the priest but it also explains what those gestures should mean for the priest, Josef K. and for us. Right after the call these sentences appear: "K. stopped abruptly and stared at the floor. For the time being he was still free, he could walk on and make his way from there through one of the three small dark wooden doors not far in front."<sup>227</sup> The narrator leads us to assume that Josef K. has heard the call, (perhaps he has not, because the narrator says he turns his head only to see what the priest is doing), and that he is now contemplating how to respond to it. Moreover we as readers are also instructed to assume that all of a sudden there appears a question of freedom, and that the call is to be associated with confinement. Why would talking to the priest in a cathedral create a question of freedom? Does Josef K. know something that the reader does not know which would render the situation meaningful and make the question above redundant? Many such questions could follow one another if we stop reading on and try, instead, to find answers for these questions. Here in order to continue to read we must assume that these interpretations are true although we are quite doubtful about that. We must suspend decisions and think of all possible ways to interpret those interpretations. Before we hear the call, we read about the voice of the priest. The narrator depicts this voice as strong, authoritative and most importantly, as *unambiguous* and *inescapable*. However, only a few lines later we read that *unambiguous* and *inescapable* voice of the priest is neither *unambiguous* nor *inescapable*. After he calls Josef K.'s name, the priest does something that absolutely

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<sup>225</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p.163

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

conflicts with his unambiguous call, and asks Josef K. if he really is Josef K, “You are Josef K.?”<sup>228</sup> How would the priest who is portrayed as being that strong, authoritative and certain, not know if the person in the cathedral is him or not? Or if he does not know Josef K. then how could he be that unambiguous and inescapable for Josef K.? That call is so essential to *The Trial* that in a way everything, including the work, depends on it. It is precisely because of that the core deception is placed right here, at the heart. Thus, the narrator is thus to be trusted as little (and as much) as the words themselves. However our own interpretations are not on the safe side either. They are no different from Josef K.’s or the narrator’s. In fact they are the most mediated ones among the three because they are three times removed from the real event.

These examples prove only one point: As long as we insist on truth and refuse to make assumptions, we are unable to move. We cannot read; we become paralyzed at the entrance. We are drowned in questions without answers. Each word or each interpretation becomes an obstacle then. Instead, the reader must continue to read; and in order to continue to read it must accept the one and only law, the law of assumption.

## **b. The Undoing of Untruth**

*So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have right to preach it, to teach people that what matters is neither freedom nor love, but the riddle, mystery to which they have to bow —without reflection and even against their conscious.*

Dostoevsky, *Grand Inquisitor*

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<sup>228</sup> Kafka, *The Trial*, Trans. Idris Parry, p.163

*And though the truth will not be discovered by such means—never can that stage be reached—yet they [my inquiries] throw light on some of the profounder ramifications of falsehood.*

Kafka, *Investigations of a Dog*

If “language itself is the arch-liar”, as H. Politzer suggests, and yet it is all we have, then could there still be any chance to reach truth?<sup>229</sup> Kafka seems to have hopes. What Blanchot says of Kafka’s work could also be said of language: “[E]verything in it is obstacle, but everything in it can also become a step.”<sup>230</sup> Let language be the arch-liar; maybe those lies could become our steps. Even if truth may not be discovered by such means, lies *can* be, and that would take us closer to truth.

W. H. Sokel in his article “Language and Truth in Kafka” underlines that “Kafka condemns literature” because of its referential character.<sup>231</sup> It is a substitute for living the life; it is like “putting of wreaths around the house instead of moving in.”<sup>232</sup> It only *refers*, as opposed to be that which it refers to. “Primacy belongs to life, to acts and feelings, not to words.”<sup>233</sup> In his diary entry of 1921 Kafka complains of this parasitical life of words, saying:

“The dependency of writing. Its dependence on the maid making the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove, even on the poor old person warming himself. All these are independent, autonomous activities; writing alone is helpless, does not dwell in itself; it is a joke, a despair.”<sup>234</sup>

Such a parasitic nature “convicts writing of essential insignificance.”<sup>235</sup> Writing does not dwell in itself, it does not live; it only *refers to* that which lives in the sensory world. In that sense, “language always remains subordinate to being”, or in other words, to living.<sup>236</sup> It is secondary. However this sensory world is not the only world. In fact it is “only the evil in the spiritual one”, which is the only true world; “There is only one

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<sup>229</sup> Politzer qtd. in Baum, p.157

<sup>230</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 6-7

<sup>231</sup> Sokel, “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 373

<sup>232</sup> Kafka qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Kafka qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

spiritual world. What we call the sensory world is only the evil in the spiritual one.”<sup>237</sup> If there is truth, then it must reside in the spiritual world, and not in the sensory world. Yet, language seems to be dependent on the sensory world which is home to the cat, the stove or the old man but not to truth. Although the true world is not the sensory world, language can only refer to the sensory world. Thus, language is already twice removed from truth because it only refers *to the sensory world*, and because it only *refers*—as opposed to be, or live—to the sensory world. This is why language “can never be the instrument of truth.”<sup>238</sup> Kafka continues to explore the relationship between language and the spiritual world, saying, “For anything outside the sensory world, language can be used only allusively, but never, not even approximately, by way of analogies, since it, in correspondence to the sensory world, only deals with possession and relationships.”<sup>239</sup> “Paradoxically, however”, says Sokel, “this debasement of language ... allows a substantial elevation of the status of literature.”<sup>240</sup> It is this passage that gives us hope that language may indeed open up a new possibility in our journey to truth. From here we can deduce that language may be non-referential and thus be freed from its parasitical life by *alluding* to the true world. Now language, which was twice removed from truth, becomes closer to truth:

“Here language does not depend on ‘the autonomous activities’ going on in the sensory world. On the contrary, language—i.e., a very special kind of non-referential, merely allusive language—is a means by which human beings may receive an inkling of the invisible, true world.”<sup>241</sup>

Language still does not express truth, but now it can “point to it and thus sharpen human awareness for it”, which means that it can take us closer to truth.<sup>242</sup> Despite being the arch-liar, literature could come to *fly around truth*. “Kafka’s trust in literature was still remarkable”, says Blanchot, and quotes from Kafka:

“Art flies around truth, but with the determination not to get burnt by it. Its skill consists of finding a place in the void where the ray of light focuses most powerfully, without knowing beforehand the location of the light source itself.”<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Kafka qtd. in *Ibid*, p. 373

<sup>238</sup> Sokel, “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 375

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>243</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 18

Literature does not know the source of the light or possess truth; rather it experiences or feels it. This applies to Kafka's writing as well. The text does not present truth, because it does not "contain a finished truth."<sup>244</sup> Rather, "[t]he only 'trace' of truth is its absence made manifest by the refutation" of assumptions of Josef K. and the reader.<sup>245</sup> Kafka's work is defined by the felt absence of truth. *The Trial* is one such masterpiece. Nothing is revealed other than that the assumption was wrong, that it was only a deception or illusion. Neither Josef K. nor we ever get to learn truth; we only learn what is *not* true. It is as if *Der Prozeß* itself is the process or trial of trying to reach truth. Both Josef K. and we as readers are on the move, and the work is nothing but this motion itself. "Kafka's fiction", says David Constantine, "is an act of seeking, it is a would-be discovery, invention."<sup>246</sup> Echoing Blanchot, who says "[t]he reading of a poem is the poem itself"<sup>247</sup>, David Constantine underlines that *The Trial* is:

"an *event*, not the *record* of an event", "[i]t is in process, it is underway" ... "The truth is not in the writer's possession when he starts, his writing is not the recording or recounting of a truth he is already master of; his writing is his laborious struggle towards that truth."<sup>248</sup>

"[S]entence by sentence seeking after truth", Kafka fails, and drags us (both Josef K. and us as readers) along with him.<sup>249</sup> We read only to find out that Josef K.'s assumptions and our assumptions were wrong. W. H. Sokel argues that this structure of failing to reach truth is reflected in *The Trial* as follows:

"[S]ome falsehood, some deception or self-deception, is contradicted and exposed. The protagonist, who embodies this falsehood, is forced to retreat, one way or another. The official viewpoint of the work, represented by the protagonist, is found to be untrue. Since the reader does not gain access to any other consciousness in the work, and since the narrator withholds all revealing commentary, the reader first tends to be persuaded by the protagonist and to side with him. Close reading calls this support into question. Too many indications emerge that make the protagonist's claim untenable. His defeat...is revealed as the refutation of a false claim."<sup>250</sup>

Josef K. and we are called to read, and thus participate in the new world that Josef K. faces and Josef K. makes us face. Comprehension does not work because what stands in

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<sup>244</sup> Constantine, p. 20

<sup>245</sup> Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka", p. 376

<sup>246</sup> Constantine, p. 19

<sup>247</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 198

<sup>248</sup> Constantine, p. 19

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka", p. 376

front of the reader (both Josef K. and us) is not an account of an event, i.e. the trial, which could be left behind after a quick glance. Instead, what the reader stands before is event performing itself in and through the reading of the reader. If it were a recounting then it would ask for understanding; but since it is the performance of the event itself, it demands participation. Neither Josef K. nor we can understand what is happening. We can only participate in it, become part of it without knowing what it is. We are mostly confined within Josef K.'s experience of the world. Although we can speculate about his perceptions and try to elaborate on them by taking into consideration whatever the text seems to offer us, we still end up swinging back and forth between probabilities. We are not allowed to go beyond that; neither is Josef K. Readers are not the only party that find themselves in such a desperate endeavor; our protagonist and the other characters are in the same process with us as well. "Kafka's characters", says D. Constantine, "are wonderfully able to hypothesize and set out alternatives and endlessly ramifying possibilities", and are "pedantically, tiresomely, exact in their accounts."<sup>251</sup> The absence of truth begets this infinite number of illegitimate children. "And in so doing," he adds:

"they rather prove the futility of this, the best, the considerable best, that they can do. Wherever the truth is, it does not seem reachable by that route. The characters actually demonstrate the inadequacy of the means—their considerable powers of argument, discrimination, definition, speculation—at their disposal. They and their author are well equipped, but with something that will not help them. As readers we participate in the failure of their kind of lucid reasoning."<sup>252</sup>

Pages of hypothetical premises culminating in hypothetical conclusions built arguments that do not touch the ground, but suspend in the air. All these overly sophisticated and intricate paths lead to nowhere except false assumptions. "Beyond that the reader is not able to go. He may witness the negation of an untruth. The truth remains shrouded from him."<sup>253</sup> However, that an assumption turns out to be false does not prove that the opposite of what it had suggested or the other rival assumption would be true. This rule would work only in a world where contradiction reigns. Yet in *The Trial*, the throne belongs to ambiguity.

"*The Trial* examines in a rational and comprehensive manner the implications of an irrational premise", says Henry Sussman, and continues, saying, "Someone must

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<sup>251</sup> Constantine, p.22

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka", p. 376

have been telling lies about Josef K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning'. In its tone, this sentence already reveals much of the distinctly Kafkan ominousness, a sense that the worst has already and ineluctably transpired. Who is this 'someone'? We can only *infer* that this hypothetical agent has been calumniating Josef K., for the turn of events has taken place in an informational blackout...Only hypothesis...can account for this downturn."<sup>254</sup> Having no other guide than the *ill-equipped* Josef K. —who is himself lost—, the reader embarks on the journey on the side of Josef K. But with each sentence s/he is haunted by insecurity. "We undergo the immediate experience of an imposture we think we are able to avoid, against which we struggle (by reconciling contradictory interpretations) — and this effort is deceptive, yet we consent to it."<sup>255</sup> Although at the outset we think that we can keep things under control and keep the imposture at a safe distance from ourselves, when *The Trial* starts, our trials to reconcile with the text immediately fall to pieces. We get even more lost than Josef K.:

"The reader, having first sided with the protagonist, on the second thought is tempted to rectify his mistake, and is inclined to see the counterworld as being right. However, on a third 'reading' —each 'reading' standing for a level of meaning further removed from the surface— he would realize that not even that equation holds, and that there is no way of establishing the 'truth'. All that can be uncovered are successive layers of untruth."<sup>256</sup>

D. Constantine argues that this successive, but unsuccessful "laborious enquiry after truth, is not just a subject of Kafka's texts but is very warp and weft. It is the nexus out of which they arise."<sup>257</sup> In other words *The Trial* is Kafka's, Josef K.'s and our failure to reach at truth.

W. H. Sokel draws attention to the place of language in this failure to capture truth, and puts forward that this failure is nothing other than language's failure to express truth:

"[S]uch a procedure demonstrates the inadequacy of all language to express the truth. All language can show is the 'retreat' of untruth. The process of making untruth evident is the only 'light' that language can shed on truth". "The way for

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<sup>254</sup> Sussman, Henry. *The Trial: Kafka's Unholy Trinity*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. p. 15

<sup>255</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 4

<sup>256</sup> Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka", p. 376-377

<sup>257</sup> Constantine, p.22

literature is therefore not to try to express the truth, but to hint at it by showing the undoing of untruth.”<sup>258</sup>

*The Trial* reveals that truth is missing. That is, it makes the absence or the lack become apparent. It does not express or communicate truth to the reader, but it does communicate the anxiety of missing that truth, “this state of ignorance and felt inappropriateness” (Thorlby, 2010). It flies us around truth; it takes us to the place in the void, which makes us participate in that missing of truth, and experience the anxiety. The work performs that flying around truth, and by reading the reader does the same. This is the communication per se. “The work is itself communication”, as Blanchot also suggests.<sup>259</sup> “Communication of the work”, says Blanchot “does not lie in the fact that it has become communicable, through reading, to a reader.”<sup>260</sup> “To read is thus not to obtain communication from the work, but to ‘make’ the work communicate itself”, in other words, let the work be.<sup>261</sup> “In this communication it is obscurity that must reveal itself and the night that must dawn. This is revelation where nothing appears, but where concealment becomes appearance.”<sup>262</sup> *The Trial* is precisely this work. Reading is not extracting truth from the text; and neither is the text itself is the work. The reader liberates the work from the text and thus, makes the work perform itself. In so doing, the reader also takes part in the performance. In fact, Blanchot describes this participation with a special word: “He [the reader] partakes of the work as the *unfolding* of something in the making, the intimacy of the void which comes to be.”<sup>263</sup>

In “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death”, Benjamin also chooses the same word to describe the parable of the doorkeeper in *The Trial*, saying, “[I]t is as if the novel were nothing but the unfolding of the parable.”<sup>264</sup> Then he continues with his clarification as to what the unfolding is like:

“The word ‘unfolding’ has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper....Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect resembles poetry.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Sokel, “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 375

<sup>259</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p.198

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, p. 199

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, p. 202-203

<sup>264</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 122

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

Benjamin also warns readers against reading Kafka in the second sense of the word, which he likens to a flat sheet of paper, “This second kind of ‘unfolding’ is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader’s pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand.”<sup>266</sup> The reader who is rigorously looking for truth wants to have truth in the palm of his/her hand, and capture it. Then everything becomes clear and meaningful, and thus makes sense. Things become accountable, because now they are placed within a system that could explain anything by some causes and effects. The Kafkaesque situation is resolved with a little touch here and there. Relationships are re-established, therefore those *bizarre details* flying in the air are now parts of a whole. Now the text communicates something, or something is being communicated through the text. The text comes to be the holder of a message whose addressee is the reader. It has turned into an account. The text acts as the means through which a message is conveyed to the reader. The reader is here; the message is there, in the book; and reading will enable the reader to receive the message that the words hold. When reading is finished, the message will have reached the reader. The text seems to already possess truth. All the reader has to do is to take it from among words. Such an understanding of language is nothing other than the bourgeoisie conception of language that Benjamin draws attention to in his essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” from 1916, where things are being communicated *through* language: “This view is the bourgeoisie conception of language...It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being.”<sup>267</sup> The work is reduced to words, and the missing truth has turned into the message. Such interpretations, however, “miss the point of Kafka’s work.”<sup>268</sup> They are “reductive”, says Constantine, “any such reading goes quite against their grain.”<sup>269</sup> But Benjamin underlines that despite this threat, Kafka’s work still survives because they are parables. Parables are such that they take in both the “the enigma and its solution, the misunderstanding and the expression of this misunderstanding, the possibility of reading within the impossibility of interpreting this reading.”<sup>270</sup> Parables are not consumed by misinterpretation, in a way

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<sup>266</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 122

<sup>267</sup> *Selected Writings / Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Vol 1.1913-1926. Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1996. p. 65

<sup>268</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 127

<sup>269</sup> Constantine, p. 22

<sup>270</sup> Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, p. 5

they invite it. After all, they “fatally lend themselves to interpretation.”<sup>271</sup> But Kafka was a “writer of parables” precisely because they could conserve both the riddle and its misunderstanding.<sup>272</sup> They can unfold in both ways; potentially it is both the bud and the flat sheet of paper. Which kind of unfolding awaits *The Trial* depends on the reader:

“Kafka had a rare capacity for creating parables himself. Yet, his parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings. One has to find one’s way in them circumspectly, cautiously, and warily.”<sup>273</sup>

It is as if saying, one has to fly around them, just like art flies around truth by pointing to in only indirectly, by alluding. Undoubtedly the reason is that every reading is a misreading, every interpretation a misinterpretation. Despite the infinite number of misinterpretation the parable still conserves the bud even though it will never unfold into a blossom.

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<sup>271</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *The Modernist Papers*. New York: Verso, 2007. p. 96

<sup>272</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 126

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid*, p. 124

CHAPTER 3. BECOMING THE PARABLE:  
KAFKA AND WRITING

*Despite my having legibly written down my name, despite their having correctly written to me twice already, they have Josef K. down in the directory. Shall I enlighten them, or shall I let them enlighten me?*

Kafka

The Online Etymology Dictionary defines *parable* as “saying or story in which something is expressed in terms of something else.”<sup>274</sup> It is a brief story that enables complicated abstract notions to speak to people in their daily life. Parable is most often defined in moral and religious terms, basically as a short narrative that aims to teach a general, moral or religious truth by translating abstract notions to everyday language so that what it wants to convey can become available for everyone. Parable in that sense aims at explanation and clarification by making concepts meet the corporeal everyday life. Thus, rather than adopting a language full of abstractions, parable “always teaches by comparison with real or literal occurrences --especially ... everyday occurrences a wide number of people can relate to.”<sup>275</sup> In that sense parable bridges the gap lying between the general truth –be it religious or moral- or knowledge and the particular individual cases of everyday life. The use of everyday language is particularly significant. Everyday language is the language that everybody always already

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<sup>274</sup> “Parable” Def. Online Etymology Dictionary.

<sup>275</sup> “Parable” Def. Literary Terms and Definitions. 1998-2011, Dr. L. Kip. July 24, 2010. The URL: < [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit\\_terms.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms.html) >

anticipates. When those abstract truths, be it moral or religious or any other kind, are translated into everyday language, then they can reach everybody's ears precisely because everybody can *hear* it. Such parables illuminate the right path so that its hearers can see and follow it. Jewish tradition too adopts parable as an enlightening tool which makes truth –the Script- meet the life. Parable translates the Hebrew word *mashal*, which is essential to *midrash*, the Jewish tradition of scriptural exegesis.<sup>276</sup> Taking into account Kafka's "own clumsy Judaism" and his interest in Jewish culture and Yiddish literature dating back to 1911, which is right before the period Kafka produces his mature works and himself calls it his breakthrough; it could prove very useful to examine the place of parable within the Jewish tradition in order to better understand what Kafka makes of it.<sup>277</sup>

Matthew T. Powell explains that Midrashic tradition is fond of different possibilities emerging out of the Script, and adds that in the Hebrew tradition the Script is believed to have "70 faces."<sup>278</sup> Such possibilities point to the Script's being "an endless fount of information and instruction" and thus, shows that it is perfectly capable of taking different shapes at different times and thus translating itself to particular situations at hand.<sup>279</sup> Powell emphasizes the special place of the Jewish parable, *mashal*, by referring to the two fundamental types of meanings which the Midrashic tradition sees in the Scripture: *P'shat*, a literal-historical meaning; and *D'rash*, an ethical-instructional meaning. The first type talks about the literal meaning of the particular situation described in the parable. The second is concerned with the *beyond* literariness of that particular situation. It aims to make its hearers *go beyond*. Powell argues that midrash uses parable exactly for this step from the literal to what is beyond the literal. Parable does not only illuminate and instruct but prescribes action as well. It aims to mobilize a particular kind of action in the hearer, therefore assumes a rhetorical mission to persuade the hearer into the action as well: It asks from its hearer to "process the scriptural passage as it relates to their world and their life."<sup>280</sup> In other words, parable wants its hearers to interpret the Scripture, to take the step to that *beyond*, to transform the passage so that it can guide him and transform his action in return.

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<sup>276</sup> Powell, Matthew T. "From an Urn Already Crumbled to Dust': Kafka's Use of Parable and The Midrashic Mashal" *REN* 58:4 (2006), p. 279.

<sup>277</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 167 (from January 6, 1912)

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280

However the very first task of parable is not to mobilize the hearer, but to convince him of the truth present in the text in order to fuel that mobilization.<sup>281</sup> It is that already-awaiting-truth that makes the steps taken into *beyond* meaningful. Truth is there, in the parable; what the hearer is to do is only to *process* that truth, to take what is already given to him in and through the parable. Parable is the bridge hanging between truth and people. Walking through the parable they can reach truth. In that sense the Midrashic interpreter is “literally a translator: one who carries the text across a divide, who negotiates the space between the text and its comprehension.”<sup>282</sup> Through the parable’ being interpreted the “Scripture speaks to the world ‘now’ instead of being heard mainly as an echo from the past.”<sup>283</sup> It is critical to note that in order for the Scripture to constantly translate itself to the contemporary world, the community has to teach the coming generation: first, that the truth exists and it is waiting to be disclosed; second, how to interpret parable so that they can access to truth residing in it for themselves; and third, how to transmit truth to the generation that will come after them. In the Jewish tradition in order for *meshal* to fulfill its function as an exegetical vehicle, parable needs to be read against a certain background, in other words, a particular context which assures that the community, the truth and the interpretation are all in their places.<sup>284</sup> This referentiality is a defining characteristic of parable. If there is any failure in these steps, then it becomes impossible to interpret the parable in the proper way, and to access to truth. And that would mean the widening of the gap between truth and the community. Family has the most critical role in securing the system by providing the children the necessary education. It is in the circle of the family that the new generations learn all these and (re)establish their Judaism. This is how the Scripture will stay alive and meaningful, and not be reduced to an impractical echo from the past.

The importance of the community and family in the continuity of Jewish tradition becomes much more telling once we take into account Kafka’s relation to his father (and thus to his Judaism) and also the general situation of the Jews in Bohemia. The Kafka family is far away from making him feel part of the family let alone the Jewish community. Franz is born to a newly emerging bourgeoisie family whose ties with

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<sup>281</sup> Powell, p. 280

<sup>282</sup> Qtd. in Powell, p. 280

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, p. 279

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, p. 280

authentic Judaism had wore out.<sup>285</sup> Hermann Kafka, the son of a butcher in Bohemian ghetto, comes to the capital city to work and rise in the social ladder—which he indeed achieves. He acquires a dry goods store which earns him a lot of money and thus enables his family to reach better standards of life. Julie Kafka is a great help to him in the work. “The Kafkas” says W. H. Sokel:

“were in many ways a typical Jewish couple of their region of the world in their time. They reflected the situation of the strenuously assimilating, but not yet fully assimilated, rising Jewish bourgeoisie, frantically trying to advance economically, which for them also meant socially, in an environment which provided a deceptive appearance of equality, prosperity, and security, a false picture of social integration which in actuality they did not enjoy.”<sup>286</sup>

Before the Emperor Franz Josef, the “fiercely Catholic and anti-Jewish”<sup>287</sup> Austro-Hungarian empire has severe restrictions on the Jewish population. With his assertion to power Emperor Franz Josef changes the inequalities in laws so as to make the state benefit from the trading activities of the community. In fact, Kafka’s parents give his name to their son for their gratitude of the improvement in their status as Jews. Yet the anti-Semitic laws, though now unwritten, are still in full force, not only in German but also in Czech society. Therefore the equality on the papers cannot translate itself to the everyday public life. A meticulously observant member of a Jewish family, Kafka feels the “profound discrepancy between the appearance of solidity and a reality of alienation”, and the “hopeless split between what seemed to be solid ground under his feet and the suspicion that things were really not holding together very well and might fly apart at any moment.”<sup>288</sup> With the passing of the new laws Jewish population flood into cities from the ghettos. Hermann Kafka is among the first generation of this “officially emancipated immigrant Jews” in Prague.<sup>289</sup> They adopt German, the language of the upper class of the society and also of governance and officialdom and “abandoned the Yiddish idiom they had spoken for centuries and which had united all Jews of Ashkenasi Europe.”<sup>290</sup> This abandonment is only one aspect of the incomplete assimilation of the Jews. Taking full advantage of the newly opened way to insert themselves into the society, they cling to business opportunities. Since their place in the

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<sup>285</sup> Sokel, *Kafka as a Jew*, p. 837

<sup>286</sup> Ibid, p. 838

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p. 839

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. 838

<sup>289</sup> Ibid, p. 839

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

society could be justified basically on the business and economical activities, Jewish population become more and more devoted to them, which, according to Sokel, “not infrequently spawned a crass materialism and almost conventional conventionalism.”<sup>291</sup>

There was an unanticipated price for the deceitful prosperity. Stéphane Moses underlines the importance of the family circle in terms of the preservation and transmission of Jewish tradition, and draws attention to the significance of the oral tradition. “In Jewish tradition”, Moses explains:

“texts themselves mean only through being taught; they are reinterpreted and re-actualized from generation to generation.”<sup>292</sup> This teaching takes place “in the private space of the house of study and prayer, in the face-to-face encounter of master and the disciple, and above all in the intimacy of the family, through the personal relationship of father and son.”<sup>293</sup>

The family constitutes the core of the tradition. It is not only where the religious truths are *re-actualized* each day, and more importantly it is where the tradition of the coming generations are prepared. When the family structure of the traditional Jewish tradition is disrupted then the whole tradition is threatened. The attempt of the Jewish community to be integrated into the German society weakens the traditional familial ties to Judaism, and the Jewish culture. Therefore the system which binds the Jewish community together and enables its continuation gets disrupted, resulting in a crisis of tradition. Hermann Kafka is only a typical example of emancipated Jews who, coming from ghettos to the industrial city, have to work very hard to affirm their place in the society. Thus, both Hermann and Julie have had to work very hard. Moses emphasizes the purposefulness of the abandonment of traditional Judaism, saying that it “often came from a conscious rejection of ancient norms and values” for carving themselves a place to exist in the modern world.<sup>294</sup> But this existence, which has already cost a great deal of hard work, has even more hardships in the store for them. Sokel highlights that:

“[t]he financial success and prosperity were substitutes for lost roots and traditions, compensation for a language, culture, and religious faith that had sustained their ancestor in centuries of persecution, and compensation as well for

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<sup>291</sup> Sokel, *Kafka as a Jew*, p. 842

<sup>292</sup> Moses, Stéphane. “Gersham Scholem’s Reading of Kafka: Literary Criticism and Kabbalah” *New German Critique* 77 (1999) Special Issue on German-Jewish Religious Thought, p. 150

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

the lack of that full civic participation which gentile society increasingly withheld from them.”<sup>295</sup>

“You are all strangers to me”, Kafka complains to his mother, “we are related by blood, but that never shows itself.”<sup>296</sup> [M]y position in my own family is punishment enough.”<sup>297</sup> “I live in my family...more strange than a stranger. I have not spoken an average of twenty words a day to my mother these last years, hardly ever said more than hello to my father. ... I have no family feeling.”<sup>298</sup> So says Franz, who does not even feel that he belongs in his family let alone the larger community of the Jews. “What I have in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.”<sup>299</sup> The family in which Franz finds himself is one that is living through this transition, like the other Jewish families in Bohemia. Having only traces of Judaism himself, and fanatically devoted to his store, Herman Kafka is far from the traditional authentic Jewish father who is the guarantor of not only the contemporary Jewish tradition but also the coming one. The mother Julie Kafka too does not have time for their son. All in all, Franz never receives enough affection which would assure a stable universe for him.

The distorted relationship between Kafka and the father, and also the mother (whom Kafka sees as the ally of the father) reflects itself in how Kafka becomes introduced to Judaism and Jewish tradition and culture as well. “But what sort of Judaism was it that I got from you?” he asks in *The Letter*, and gives his answer: <sup>300</sup>

“It was indeed, so far as I could see, a mere nothing, a joke—not even a joke. Four days a year you went to the synagogue, where you were, to say the least, closer to the indifferent than to those who took it seriously, patiently went through the prayers as a formality, sometimes amazed me by being able to show me in the prayer book the passage that was being said at the moment, and for the rest, so long as I was present in the synagogue (and this was the main thing) I was allowed to hang around wherever I liked. And so I yawned and dozed through the many hours (I don't think I was ever again so bored, except later at dancing lessons)... I was not fundamentally disturbed in my boredom, unless it was by the bar mitzvah, but that demanded no more than some ridiculous memorizing, in other words, it led to nothing but some ridiculous passing of an examination; and, so far as you were concerned, by little, not very significant incidents, as when you were called to the Torah and passed, in what to my way of feeling was a purely

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<sup>295</sup> Sokel, *Kafka as a Jew*, p. 842

<sup>296</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, p. 229 (from August 25, 1913)

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, p. 320 (from December 5, 1914)

<sup>298</sup> Ibid, p. 231 (from August 21, 1913)

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, p. 252 (from January 8, 1914)

<sup>300</sup> Kafka, *Franz Kafka Letter to his Father*, no pag.

social event... That's how it was in the synagogue; at home it was, if possible, even poorer... This was the religious material that was handed on to me.”<sup>301</sup>

Judaism, which could give Franz the chance to connect to the family and also to the community of the Jew at large and solidify his sense of belonging, is presented to him as devoid of any authentic meaning and feeling by his father. Instead, it becomes yet another region of the father, and thus source of guilt.

“You really had brought some traces of Judaism with you from the ghetto-like village community; it was not much and it dwindled a little more in the city... but it was too little to be handed on to the child; it all dribbled away while you were passing it on. ... [T]he few flimsy gestures you performed in the name of Judaism... For you they had meaning as little souvenirs of earlier times, and that was why you wanted to pass them on to me, but since they no longer had any intrinsic value... this could not be successful. It was not a matter of any sort of instruction you ought to have given your children, but of an exemplary life. Had your Judaism been stronger, your example would have been more compelling too.”<sup>302</sup>

Kafka asks how his father, who does not have enough of Judaism even for himself, could reproach [him] “for not making an effort (for the sake of piety at least, as you put it) to cling to a similar, insignificant scrap.”<sup>303</sup> Here Moses calls attention to “the inconsistencies of a demand [of father] that the son remain loyal to values father had not succeeded in transmitting to him (nor even legitimizing)”, and calls this the *double bind*.<sup>304</sup> “This double bind”, he explains:

“reflects the uncertainties of a transitional generation, torn between its link to the past and drawn to assimilation, in which paternal authority has been irredeemably devalued. Indeed, in Judaism the permanence of tradition rests precisely upon the intangible strength of this authority; it is the authority of the father that guarantees the authenticity and the ever-resent validity of divine Law.”<sup>305</sup>

What Kafka observes in the father is not belief or worship, but only parodies of it which are done not for the sake of the divine Law but done “with an effort to be seen by the right people —namely Jewish millionaires— in the right places — namely the temple on High Holidays.”<sup>306</sup> For Hermann Kafka, the Law is “nothing more than an empty

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<sup>301</sup> Kafka, *Franz Kafka Letter to his Father*, no pag.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Moses, p. 151

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Sokel, *Kafka as a Jew*, p. 843

container devoid of meaning.”<sup>307</sup> When Kafka complains of being condemned to live in the world of the father, he probably means that he cannot free himself from that Law which does not have any content but only authority. Thus, the divine Law is not accessible any more. What has been transmitted to Kafka is only the responsibility to pass down what he is not given in the first place. When the father sees that Kafka is not clinging to what he himself has been clinging (instead of the authentic Judaism), the father accuses Kafka of malevolent betrayal.<sup>308</sup>

Benjamin says, “Kafka’s work presents a sickness of tradition” where wisdom, that is the “the epic side of truth”, is nowhere to be found.<sup>309</sup> Moses refers to Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” where he elaborates on the epic side of truth, which is wisdom, and its transmission. Benjamin argues that wisdom is transmitted through storytelling, in other words, through the story. The structure of narrative assures a coherent world by providing a particular view of the world from an internally-coherent perspective. Wisdom lies in seeing a coherent narrative in the chaotic world. Moses explains that when Benjamin says the sickness of tradition, he is pointing at nothing but the impossibility of providing any coherent story. “It is this consistency of truth that has been lost.”<sup>310</sup> But what Kafka’s stories assure is not a stable and secure world founded upon coherent truth, but the exact opposite, a world that constantly wavers, shaking from head to toe. “This is why,” says Benjamin, in Kafka, “we can no longer speak of wisdom. Only the products of its decay remain.”<sup>311</sup> Among what remains is “the rumor about the true things (a sort of theological whispered intelligence dealing with matters discredited and obsolete).”<sup>312</sup> Rumors are the decay of truth. In the sickness of tradition, instead of truth, all we have is the rumors; and rumors do not necessitate that there really is a truth. The only truth at hand is the truth of rumors and nothing more.

“Kafka’s writings are by their nature parables” says Benjamin. Yet these parables are very different from *mashal*. Instead of illuminating the true path to be taken or the true way to see things, Kafka’s parables “raise a mighty paw against” submission, whether be it submission to any truth or submission to any interpretation which would

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<sup>307</sup> Moses, p. 151

<sup>308</sup> Kafka, *Franz Kafka Letter to his Father*, no pag.

<sup>309</sup> Benjamin. *Illuminations*, p. 143

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144

twist and bend the story so that it can appear to present an internally-coherent truth.<sup>313</sup> Kafka's parables shine with a light that "only illuminates the depth of the abyss"; they only darken.<sup>314</sup> In that sense they serve to devil —just like Kafka says writing does—, not to the divine. In 1911 when a Yiddish Theatre comes to Prague, and Kafka meets Löwy, whom will become a close friend. Thanks to him and the theatre, Kafka becomes introduced to a new kind of Judaism, different from the father's. Kafka never misses any play of them, and becomes deeply involved with Jewish tradition and Yiddish Literature. He reads Talmud and Kabbalah, even tries to learn Hebrew. Thus Kafka learns more and more about Judaism, an essential component of which is midrashic mashal, the parable. As already discussed, in Jewish tradition mashal presents a coherent picture of the world, illuminates the path to truth, transmits wisdom, and prescribes taking (the right) action. Yet the parables of a German-speaking Jewish son to whom neither divine truth nor the Jewish tradition has been handed down undermines the very foundations upon which both parable and also the coherency and truth presented in and through the parable are built. Neither story nor wisdom remains intact. This is why Bernheimer defines Kafka's texts as metatextual parables, which make parable" undo the concept of parable advanced in the text itself."<sup>315</sup> In that sense, Kafka's parables are parables of mashals, undermining their of status vis-à-vis truth and the rumor of truth. They point to the gap between the hearer and the rumor of truth; and make the hearer experience the unbridgeable-ness of the gap. We know nothing of truth. All one can do is to waver around it. Kafka's parable transmits the nebulousness of the world as it appears to Kafka, uncertainty of existence as he feels it to his bones.

In fact, Kafka even has a parable titled "On Parables", written in the last years of his life, which Sokel holds to be "the final statement of his poetics."<sup>316</sup>

*"On Parables*

*Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: "Go over," he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that*

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<sup>313</sup> Benjamin. *Illuminations*, p. 144

<sup>314</sup> Politzer, p. 182

<sup>315</sup> Bernheimer, p. 1263

<sup>316</sup> Sokel, *Two Worlds*, p. 377

*already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.*

*Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.*

*Another said: I bet that is also a parable.*

*The first said: You have won.*

*The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.*

*The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.*<sup>317</sup>

Sokel argues that *On Parables* is a parable about Kafka's poetics, about literature, about literary or poetic discourse and its applicability to life.<sup>318</sup> What is of crucial importance here is the shift of meaning in the parable.

The parable opens with the discontent that the many give voice to, concerning the gap between what the wise say and the everyday life people live. Here what the many mean by parable is the *mashal*, the bridge between truth or law and everyday life. In *mashal*, literature submits to the divine truth and serves as a tool of action.<sup>319</sup> With the intervention of the first man and his suggestion of *following the parable*, however, things get complicated. Sokel argues that here the meaning of the word parable undergoes a drastic change. Here Kafka's parable rises a mighty paw against submission. Sokel divides the statement into two parts, the first part being the conditional if clause, and the second part hypothetical condition fulfilled; and says that the shift of meaning occurs just here:

“In part one, *Gleichnis* still means ‘parable’ [*mashal*]. It conveys this sense: If the many were to imitate and carry out the precepts of the sages perfectly, ‘follow’ them as disciples ‘follow’ their masters, they too would become paragons of desirable behavior, emulated by all. Being supported by action, literature would and can make a difference in life. However, this is not the meaning, at least not the literal meaning, of *Gleichnis* in part two; in fact, it clashes with it. For part two literally advises an empirical impossibility: the transformation of human beings into linguistic structures.”<sup>320</sup>

Becoming the parable, when seen from the perspective of everyday reality, could only make sense metaphorically simply because you literally cannot become the parable.

*Another said: I bet that is also a parable.*

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<sup>317</sup> Kafka, *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

<sup>318</sup> Sokel, “Language and Truth”, p. 380

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid*, p. 379

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid*, p. 379

*The first said: You have won.*  
*The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.*  
*The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.*”<sup>321</sup>

The speaker who says that is also a parable evaluates the phrase becoming the parable from the perspective of everyday life. Literally it is not possible that you become parable in this world. “While one stays alive, the first speaker’s advice remains ‘only’ a metaphor. One cannot live it.”<sup>322</sup> Thus, the phrase can only be understood metaphorically. Here it is only a figure of speech; “it cannot be translated into action.”<sup>323</sup>

Winning in reality, the second speaker loses in parable because if he had read the phrase literally then he would turn into the parable himself, like Gregor Samsa turns into a vermin, or Josef K. whose existence merges with that of the court. In other words, when you take the phrase literally and follow it, then it is no longer a metaphor for you precisely because you have bowed to it and become the parable. Paradoxically it would then no longer be *merely* metaphor.

Sokel continues his argument by underlining that the *parable* at the very end is *not* a figure of speech any more, but “empirical reality or actuality”<sup>324</sup> itself:

“‘Wirklichkeit’. The identical spatial preposition ‘in’ —‘in *Wirklichkeit* you have won,’ ‘*im Gleichnis* you have lost’— establishes a parallelism between two localities or realms. One is the realm of action and life, what Kafka in the...diary entry called ‘autonomous activities’; the other is the realm in which significance takes place of the action [*putting of wreaths around the house instead of moving in*], the ‘legendary’ realm of the *Gleichnis*.”<sup>325</sup>

For those who follow the metaphor *literally* (i.e. Kafka, Josef K., Gregor Samsa and the reader) and become the parable themselves, the distinction between the two realms does not hold any more. The gap between *meaning* and *being*, *literature* and *everyday life* ceases to exist because they blend into each other; they become one another. Literature becomes life and meaning becomes being. Now “the parable is daily life, and daily life is a parable.” Josef K. and Gregor Samsa both wake up into the world of *Gleichnis* where to be and to write (in other words, to read) is not separate from each other, but

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<sup>321</sup> Kafka, Franz. “On Parables” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

<sup>322</sup> Sokel, “Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Kafka”, p. 380

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

one and the same. The Trial is nothing other than Kafka's, Josef K.'s and the reader's metamorphosis.

Kafka follows the parable, takes the metaphor literally and turns into a linguistic being whose existence lies in the text. This is the darkening metaparable of Kafka which celebrates transforming its readers into linguistic beings. Agamben underlines that “[a] life that resolves itself completely in writing”, which is what Kafka's metaparable seems to suggest and Kafka does, “corresponds, for Benjamin, to a Torah whose keys has been lost.”<sup>326</sup> Then Agamben quotes Benjamin, “I consider the sense of the inversion toward which many of Kafka's allegories tend to lie in an attempt to transform life into Scripture.”<sup>327</sup> Kafka metamorphoses life into writing, into a Scripture without keys. “The absolute intelligibility of a life wholly resolved into writing corresponds to the impenetrability of a writing that, having become indecipherable, now appears as life.” In Kafka, law that becomes life and life that becomes law face each other: “Only at this point” Agamben argues, “do the two terms...(bare life and the form of law) abolish each other and enter into a new dimension.”<sup>328</sup> In other words, Kafka has the door of the Law closed by making bare life and the form of law abolish each other. Although no prophet, Kafka thus opens up a new possibility for a different relation between law, life and literature.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 54

<sup>327</sup> Benjamin, qtd. in *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55

<sup>329</sup> Benjamin, p. 126 “Kafka was a writer of parables, but he did not found a religion.”

## CONCLUSION

Kafka could not better express how he experienced the world he finds himself in than with parable. The son falling ill with the sickness of tradition, Kafka subverts the traditional use of the parable in Jewish tradition so that it comes to undermine itself, its claim on truth. Mashal, which bridges the gap and makes the divine truth accessible to the community, becomes in Kafka's hands what cries out the depth, and thus the impossibility of bridging the abyss in between. *The Trial* is such a masterpiece. It emerges as a parable before which not only Josef K. but also Kafka and the reader stand. Its peculiar structure is built upon withdrawing truth from anyone who has heard its call and has answered it by *reading*, which means by *writing* the work. Each step is tentative and hesitant. From then on, we are already *in* the parable with Josef K. Such a withdrawal renders the question whether or not there really is a truth to be withdrawn in the first place redundant since the only truth at hand is that truth is nowhere to be found. Kafka encounters the world; Josef K. encounters the court and the reader encounters *The Trial*. Faced with the inexplicable all three act in a similar way. They try to *read* the inexplicable, and make sense of it. In and through reading they write what is not yet written. They write their own parable which engulfs them. By reading, they metamorphose into parable themselves; they become essential participants in parable. The trial of Kafka, Josef K. and the reader is one and the same: how to read the parable. To read is to deceive and be deceived simultaneously. *The Trial* is the novel of this self-

deception. It is the *Prozeß* through which the trial to “explain the inexplicable ... turn[s] to end in the inexplicable.”<sup>330</sup>

“Writing” for Kafka, “is the reward for serving the devil.”<sup>331</sup> Kafka’s parables do not serve the divine. Parable is a double bind that both promises and also withdraws truth, which proves perfect match for Kafka’s horribly double life. Parable is located right in the middle of the drift, making its hearer suspend over it. Although it has traditionally been defined in “a practical-religious, a moral-salvational context,”<sup>332</sup> Kafka distorts it as much as his existence gets distorted under the weight of the parable that entangles him, that is, his world. Bernheimer underlines another possible meaning of the Greek verb *paraballein*. This devilish —as opposed to the divine— meaning resonates with what Kafka makes of *mashal* and literature. He argues that, *paraballein*, the Greek verb for *to compare* from which the word *parable* derives:

“is [etymologically] closely related to *diabellein*, literally to throw across but figuratively to slander, and hence to *diabolus*, slanderer, devil. Thus, the parable, which presents itself as a story illustrating a truth, suggests through, its etymology that no truth can be illustrated, that any comparison is a diabolic throwing-across whose very figuration is a slanderous distortion.”<sup>333</sup>

In his article titled *K*, Agamben suggests that the initial K. might in fact stand for *kalumniator*, which means *slanderer* in Latin, and offers a challenging interpretation that sets off from the intricate yet essential relationship between self-accusation and law. Slander draws man into being in law.<sup>334</sup> Could we not think of being entangled in law through self-slander to be like being entangled in literature through reading? In other words, could we not think of reading as some sort of self-slandering? This study has attempted to show that we indeed could. If we roughly define *kalumnia* —to slander— in terms of creating that which is not itself there yet as a truth, by telling stories in whose emergence we take part in, then to slander is not that far away from what Blanchot describes as literary reading. “What is book no one reads? Something

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<sup>330</sup> Kafka, Franz. “Prometheus” in *The Complete Stories*. n. pag.

<sup>331</sup> Kafka qtd. in Bernheimer, p. 1264

<sup>332</sup> Sokel, *Language and Truth*, p. 379

<sup>333</sup> Bernheimer, p. 1264

<sup>334</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. “K” in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben Law, Literature, Life*. Ed. Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, Alex Murray. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. Web. p.15

that is not yet written.”<sup>335</sup> To read, then, is to read that which has not been written yet. It is the reader who lets the work, dead and buried in the book, to come to life.<sup>336</sup> In other words, the work emerges only through the reader’s reading of the book. Diabolical literature *could* resemble *diabellein*.

In “K”, Agamben argues that there is no accusation, guilt or trial other than the one Josef K. inflicts on himself by self-slandering: “[T]here is no accusation and no trial, at least until the moment in which he who believes he is accused has not accused himself.”<sup>337</sup> The whole process starts when Josef K. takes part and becomes entangled in the process. Such a reading is very much in line with the reading this study has tried to achieve. Josef K.’s trial is aesthetically created, by his becoming an artist and beginning to read that which is not written. In and through this reading, *The Trial* both as the trial of Josef K. and also the work itself, come to life. The reader of Josef K. also creates *The Trial* aesthetically, by reading. Both the protagonist and the reader are creators in that sense, just as Kafka is. All creation begins with reading; reading that which has not been written yet. “Every man brings a slanderous trial against himself,”<sup>338</sup> so says Agamben; each one is his own slanderer and thus starts his own trial. Is this not what every reader does while reading *The Trial*? “[The book] does not come into its presence as a work except in the space opened by this unique reading, each time the first and each time the only.”<sup>339</sup> Each unique reading corresponding to each unique trial. Every one lets his own trial be; that is the essential point where reading and self-slandering meet. The self-slanderer *is* a reader. He reads the parable, just like Josef K. does. Before the parable, both Kafka, Josef K. and the reader are equally guilty and innocent.

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<sup>335</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, p. 192

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, p. 193-4

<sup>337</sup> Agamben, *Law, Literature, Life*, p. 21

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14

<sup>339</sup> Blanchot, *Space of Literature*, p. 193

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