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## Kafka On Trial: Polysemy and Epistemological Enactment in Modern Literature

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# Kafka On Trial:

The Difficulty of Polysemy in Modern Literature

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## An Introduction to Epistemological Difficulty

*Un sens trop précis rature*  
*Ta vague littérature*<sup>1</sup>

In his essay, *On Difficulty*, George Steiner outlines four types of difficulty that a reader might stumble upon within a literary text. The first of these he dubs “contingent” or “epiphenomenal” difficulty. This is a difficulty that is probably most synonymous with the conventional sense of the term and signifies that there is a missing, yet ultimately accessible, piece of information that must be sought to furnish the meaning of a text. The clearest example of this would be a text in which a reader must look up something—a term, a word, a historical or cultural reference that is unknown to he or she—in order to piece together the logic of the work.

The second difficulty that the critic attempts to classify lies not within any empirical or semantic obstructions inherent in the text, but rather with the reader’s response—or rather his inability to respond positively to the text. When there remain no difficulties to be looked up, and yet the reader still feels himself unable to access the deeper signification of the text, this is said to be a “modal” difficulty.

A third class of difficulty, according to Steiner’s taxonomy is “tactical” difficulty. That is, in effect, a dissonance between the intention of an author or of a work and the linguistic means that presents such an intention and might be seen as a kind of syntactical difficulty. The purpose of such stylistic impediments varies, yet the fundamental effects,

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<sup>1</sup> Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Plusieurs Sonnets*. N.p.: n.p., 1887. Print.  
(A meaning too precise/crosses out your vague literature)

for our purposes, should be noted as the desire to dislodge the reader, and language itself, from the stagnation and devaluation of everyday language and syntax.

However, it is the fourth category of difficulty that Steiner presents—deemed “ontological”—that is perhaps most relevant to the diachrony associated with the poetics of modern literature that I intend to address. If the first three modes of difficulty take part in a “contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning,”<sup>2</sup> as Steiner suggests, then this fourth stratum of difficulty puts these concordances in question, placing them under the scrutiny of epistemological questions about language and its communicative values. Some of the key points of this type of difficulty are that it seems, at least in part, to be inspired by an increasingly solipsistic and closed-off sense of language, “a private ideal of communication”<sup>3</sup> and a lack of faith in language to portray the intimate singularity of human feeling. In situating the term, Steiner invokes the idea of “[an] ancient trope of inadequate discourse, the conceit whereby words fall short of the unique immediacies of individual experience.”<sup>4</sup>

In a sense, the implication of a literature that has been exposed to this class of difficulty is also the self-reflexivity of a language that questions its own ability to signify—to penetrate through a shroud of linguistic solipsism and deliver its message to a reader. Though Steiner refers broadly to the school of modern poetry, (he uses Paul Celan’s *Largo* to exemplify this concept), it is equally within the narratives of Kafka, Proust, James and other modern novelists that an *intra-textual* dialogue is presented by

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<sup>2</sup> Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. United States: Oxford University Press, 1978. N. P.40. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. United States: Oxford University Press, 1978. N. P.42. Print.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3

virtue of this conundrum (that of *ontological* difficulty): A literature that uses the very linguistic means it condemns to essay an uncertain and often uneasy signification.

Yet before we deal with representations of ontological—or to simplify Steiner’s term, epistemological difficulty—within the narratives of Kafka, Proust and other moderns, it is important to note that an author’s skepticism about the effectiveness of linguistic conveyance was by no means a novelty by the twentieth century. In fact, it is this cynical viewpoint that was the major premise of a literary movement within the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that has come to be known in German as *Sprachkrise* (or in some circles, *Sprachskepsis*)—or, in English, “language crisis.” The early intimations of the *Sprachkrise* that shook the foundations of realism and in many ways shaped the (epistemologically minded) negativity that is a trademark of modernism, can be traced to numerous literary works produced by German and Viennese authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George. Yet, perhaps the most notable example is Hugo van Hofmannsthal’s *Letter to Lord Chandos*. Written in 1902, this fictive letter recounts the crisis of a Viennese aristocrat and his subsequent withdrawal from literary society. Shaken by a bout of solipsism, Chandos has lost all faith in language and laments its inability to capture the essential qualities that compose a hitherto vaulted inner-world.

For it is, indeed, something entirely unnamed, even barely nameable which, at such moments, reveals itself to me, filling like a vessel any casual object of my daily surroundings with an overflowing flood of higher life.<sup>5</sup>

In some senses, these unnamable, unsayable elements are the *stuff*—the subject and substance—of modernism. Arriving on the heels of a trend in 19<sup>th</sup> Century European

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo, Von Hofmannsthal. *Letter to Lord Chandos*. N.p.: n.p., 1902. Print.

Realism that embraced an objective sense of language in order to depict an exterior and material world as it is, unobstructed by human emotion and the subjectivity of authorial overtones, modern literature moves in quite the opposite direction—that is, inward. Certainly in Proust we see what might be dubbed the fathoming of cloistered vaults of human consciousness. And although Proust is, perhaps, one of the more optimistic moderns when it comes to capturing this inner world and its unique essence(s), there soon comes to the surface of this genus of literature a plethora of questions and an abundance of skepticism surrounding the ability of language (a purportedly objective communicative mode) to capture for the author, and subsequently to relate to his reader, a subject that is so inherently singular and subjective. With this view, we return to Steiner’s concept of: “the ancient trope of inadequate discourse,” and the commonality of language that renders it a poor vessel for the transmission of an expression that is necessarily personal and “unique.”

Yet, one might note that Hofmannsthal’s work is not itself an example of *ontological difficulty*, though it does seem to be addressing what is perhaps, the major cause of such an epistemologically minded literary phenomenon. Thus, despite the fact that its core subject seems to be a paralytic and linguistic problem that underlies the *transubstantiation* of human experience into language, it is actually a remarkably clear and poignant piece of literature that displays hardly any of the tropes of difficulty that we have previously discussed (apart from a handful of possible contingent difficulties). Alternatively, the works that I intend to address do more than just address this epistemological issue at a surface level. In a sense, it is these works written by later moderns—including several of Kafka’s novels and parables, sections of Proust’s *In*

*Search of Lost Time*, and even Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*—that delve into the *ontological* difficulty of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's *Sprachkrise*, presenting and, in a typically *Derridean* sense, enacting hermeneutical and linguistic allegories of the interpretative process (and really, what amounts to the impossibility) of critical reading.

Still, it might be helpful to provide more context before introducing these modern allegories. Even before Hofmannsthal's modernist manifesto, poets like Mallarmé, Valéry and later, Paul Celan made early contributions to an increasingly palpable sense of linguistic difficulty in their notoriously *difficult* poetry that seems to put both the function of language and its limits into question. Unlike Hofmannsthal, who has clearly not forgone the utilitarian value of language, as demonstrated (rather effectively and, in this sense, paradoxically) in his solipsistic lamentations, Mallarmé eschews the semantic wealth of language in favor of its pure, sonorous aestheticism. It might be said that these early poets occupy an extreme endpoint of a tension between the established communicative powers of language (as perhaps inflated by preceding Enlightenment ideals) and the mendacious arbitrariness of verbal-linguistic referents—from a semiotic standpoint, the discrepancy between signifier and signified (“das Schreiben ist Hilflös”<sup>6</sup>).

Yet, while the latter is a motif for Kafka, it is the law of Mallarmé's prose and poetry. Thus one might remark that, while the French poet appears to distance himself from any intimations of verbal utility, Kafka does not withdraw entirely from this world. Like Proust and James, Kafka engages this fundamental breakdown of linguistic certainty by means of narrative discourse—one that does partake in the communicative powers of language, but not by any traditional or easily intelligible means. As I have previously

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<sup>6</sup> Kafka, Franz. *Über das Schreiben*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983. P.150. Print.



suggested, it is most notably through the rhetorical implications of a set of convoluted and rather difficult allegories that this modern argument about language and its uncertain *significant* potential might be teased out. While, James and Proust are supplementary to this discussion of emerging expressive modes, it is with Kafka and his markedly modern style—and its failure or success—that I place the burden of this modern meaning.

## Kafka Takes the Stand

In his compilation of analytical essays, *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin ends a section on Kafka with the following synopsis of Kafka's life and work: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: It is the purity and beauty of a failure."<sup>7</sup> Despite the apparent deprecation of this summarizing line, there is an undeniable admiration for Kafka's "peculiar" penchant for *failure* – otherwise what utility could Benjamin have found in dedicating a chapter to the abortive writer? Is it possible that so-called *failure* of Kafka as a writer could constitute a worthy subject and, possibly, a worthy end that is sought in Kafka's writing? Alternatively, is it possible that there is something that Benjamin has missed about the Czech author's work that might have led the critic's inference astray?

To further untangle this conclusion of Benjamin, we must understand the ways in which Kafka might be deemed a failed writer, and furthermore, the ways in which the notion of failure permeates the logos and rhetoric of his texts. Many of Kafka's stories remained unfinished when he died, and it is clear enough that this had little to do with the author's laziness or willingness to produce literature. For Kafka there was an undeniable sense that the completion of many, if not most of his works, and the signification that they strove to attain, were necessarily unachievable and irretrievable. Thus, the leitmotif of an "*Unrettbar Reden*," translated as "irretrievable<sup>8</sup> speech," comes to pervade almost all of his works, appearing often to consume any possibility of exegetical or significative clarity that might be unearthed within the absurd semantics and difficult rhetoric of his texts. The idea of the irretrievable or the unsayable—that which necessarily cannot be

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Random House Inc, 1968. P.121. Print.

<sup>8</sup> *Unrettbar* might be more accurately translated as unsalvageable or incapable of salvation—which would combine a religious aspect with the clear linguistic connotation.

transmitted—is certainly problematic for a man like Kafka who, as an author, spent much of his life toiling within the shadowy vicissitudes of linguistic semiotics. Yet the primordial root of Kafka’s failure, though related to a shortcoming of semiotics that I will discuss later, is possibly buried even deeper within the author, below the realm of language, writing and communication. Indeed, it might be traced to the most basic level of sentient being: namely, consciousness. One might infer that it is this dichotomy between the self and the world, and the incompatibility and irreconcilability of the two that forges Kafka’s affinity for failure, incoherence, and the impossibility of unity.

Naturally, the two-fold structure of language is an analogue, and, effectively, a mimetic representation of this dichotomy of self-hood. Like consciousness, understood as a kind of mirror or spectral reflection of the physical world in which it is ensconced—a reality that it strives to appropriate, order and thus obtain for itself—language attempts the same process of transmitting meaning and reality between two parties. This, of course, is the foundation of semiotics, a system that relies on the ability of a subject or of a *signifier* to retain, and subsequently, to relate a *signified*. It is within this process and the semiotic discrepancy between its two parties that *failure* in Kafka’s writing is perhaps preordained.

To illustrate this linguistic dilemma and its prominence in Kafka’s works, we might look to *The Departure* as an introductory example.

I ORDERED my horse to be brought from the stables. The servant did not understand my orders. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse, and mounted. In the distance I heard the sound of a trumpet, and I asked the servant what it meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me and asked: where is the master going?” I don’t know,” I said, “just out of here, just out of here. Out of here, nothing else, it’s the

only way I can reach my goal.” “So you know your goal?” he asked. “Yes,” I replied, “I’ve just told you. Out of here – that’s my goal.”<sup>9</sup>

The foremost attribute of the text is a communicative breakdown and, as viewed through the lens of a literary theorist, a fundamental failure of semiotic structures. The significative fissures are noted first in the firm imperative, “ ‘I ORDERED my horse’ ...The servant did not understand” and, subsequently, in an interrogative demand, “I asked the servant what it meant?... ‘He knew nothing.’ ” Both attempts at communicative discourse between the pair reveal a profound and irresolvable misunderstanding and the concomitant conveyance is lost between them. To add to the apparent confusion of the passage, the sounding of the trumpet—a non-semantic cue with an inherently elusive signification—joins in this breakdown of signs.

Understood as a linguistic allegory, this story would provide some insight into the author’s apparent aims, and might lend itself as a paradigm for comprehensibility and overarching rhetorical structures within Kafka’s parables. What seems to be outlined in the tale is a kind of austere linguistic asceticism, at least on a semantic level—the indication being that a literal reading of the tale will be of little use to his reader and his interpretative exegesis of the text. The narrator relates: “...the servant didn’t understand my orders. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse and mounted.” The textual realm in which the narrator makes his home (though he appears as an outsider to this world) is one that appears cold and dead; the servant, particularly, seems to be an emblem of a world that is largely deaf and dumb to him. In a sense, this world represents the fixity and stasis of written word, estranged from its author and his deducible motives—a

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<sup>9</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.449. Print.

dominion and a predicament that Kafka, as the author of the text, shares with this narrator.

The culminating suggestion of communicative failure between the master and servant comes with the recognition that the latter will receive no help from the servant and the linguistic possibilities that are negated by his supposed subordinate's lack of cooperation. Sharpening this allegory to a point, we might infer, specifically, that the servant is metonymic for direct (literal) semantic value of which Kafka's writing is bereft.<sup>10</sup> The problem with semantic communication, it would seem (apart from the general representative idolatry and inadequacy of semiotic transmission), is that it is a system based on both communal and fixed assumptions, and thus excludes the possibility of singular expression. Thus, the narrator's turning away from this primary function of linguistic conveyance, as perhaps intimated by his emphatic insistence on making his way "out of here," suggests that meaning in Kafka's stories might instead be limited to the latently rhetorical and the symbolic.<sup>11</sup>

An alternate version of the Parable, titled instead, *My Destination*, further suggests this possibility:

"You have no provisions with you," he said. "I need none," I said, "the journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don't get anything on the way. No provisions can save [*retten*] me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense [*ungeheures*] journey."

The linguistic austerity in this reworking of the parable is echoed by the master's lack of provisions, his insistence upon starvation.<sup>12</sup> The use of *retten*—which insinuates the trope of *Unrettbar Reden*—seems indeed to suggest that language, at least in its literal form,

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<sup>10</sup> Assuming that the essential signification of the story is not simply: a man wants to leave his stable.

<sup>12</sup> *The Hunger Artist* too seems to be another example of equating starvation with the author's circumspect linguistic inclinations.

cannot be the means of the master's salvation, nor can it be the instrument for the conveyance of the text's underlying meaning.

As this example suggests, Kafka's discussion of language in his narratives—as a rule—is never explicit. Just as the author's motives are obscured, any meaningful, direct, semantic signification seems nonexistent; instead, his ruminations on linguistics—and possibly on the value of his own authorship—are staged in the guise of narrative and veiled within a wealth of allegory, a system that is well suited to Kafka's typical narrative mode and that might best be described as a kind of non-didactic parable. This is to say, it has all the allegorical potency of a religious or otherwise instructive parable, yet lacks the immediate accessibility and hermeneutical clarity of an edifying message.

We might take another short story, *An Imperial Message*, as an example. In this parable, an emperor has summoned a messenger to carry a personal message to “you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow, cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun.” If we are to view the emperor as a possible analogue to Kafka as the author, then his “humble subject [*Untertanen*]”<sup>13</sup> is his reader. This German word, *Untertanen*, is defined as sort of historical subject—an object of discourse. The suggestion here may be that, at one level, Kafka's text is examining the reader and his relation to a text. Returning to this potential allegory, the job of the messenger—with whom the burden of communication, of acquainting our subject with an object, or from a semiotic standpoint a *signified*—might be reserved for language.

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<sup>13</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.4. Print.

Despite the messenger's initial bravado ("a powerful, indefatigable man...cleaves a way for himself through the throng"), he will ultimately be unable to accomplish his task:

The multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end...how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them.<sup>14</sup>

Just as the messenger of the parable cannot deliver his message, there echoes an allegorical implication that perhaps Kafka, as the author of the text, is ambivalent about his own ability to communicate with his reader and possibly, unsure of the value of his own body of writings. Certainly the latter would be supported by Kafka's insistence that most of his unpublished writings be burned upon his death. Regardless, the incessant vacillation of his texts are a reminder of linguistic uncertainty and the general doubt that pervades almost all of his works. The author's peripatetic turn that we have seen above, one that is typical of Kafka's prose, is insistent upon writing as a dialectical signifier and, in turn, reading as a dialectical experience. If at one moment he confides in language; in the next, he will negate what trust has been established.

This dialectical pattern may be demonstrated in another of Kafka's parables, *The Trees*.

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they lie sleekly and a little push should be enough to set them rolling. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.5. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.382. Print.

The subject of this first sentence, a first person plural, may appear ambiguous. Yet to the reader who is familiar with Kafka there looms tacitly an impression that “*we*” might refer to the words of the text, speaking for themselves (La parole qui a la parole pour lui-même). If this is the case, the allegorical significance of this shorter short story becomes illuminated; it is a dialectical commentary on language, addressed to us by language itself. But far more than just a dialectical commentary on language, what we may have here is the portrayal of language—and the transmission of its meaning—as a dialectic. On one hand, “like trunks in the snow...firmly wedded to the ground” language has the capacity to be taken entirely literal—to have a rigidly fixed and objective meaning. Yet, with the turn of the dialectic, “a little push should be enough to set them rolling,” we discern a sense of the fluidity and movement of inference. If this “little push” could be the effect of the reader who interprets the tale, and so galvanizes its signification into life, then there is inherently the implication that his reading of the text is of a subjective nature almost like the Rorschach tests used by psychologists on their patients. This possibility would equally implicate language as having an inherently polysemic potential—that is, it is capable of having plural significations, each individual to the reader of the text.

The latter view of this relationship between text and reader is particularly conducive to the use of allegory, which insists on a degree of separation between language and a literal interpretation. It is interesting to consider that Kafka’s penchant for parabolic writings, with all their reliance on allegory, may be related to his ruminations on the rhetorical possibilities of language. Typical of Kafka’s penchant for oscillation, he steps back from this seemingly optimistic possibility, with the resigned line, “No it can’t be done,” only to change his mind again with the final line: “But see, even that is only



appearance.” It seems to be this the movement involved in the reciprocity of these two entities—the rigid authority of the text and the catalytic and dynamic glance of the interpreter—that drives the thrust of Kafka’s hermeneutical argument.

Another of Kafka’s parables that seems to deal with sort of dialectic of fluid and fixed meaning is *A Little Fable*. In the following text, Kafka sets up what might be described as a kind of hermeneutical trap:

“ALAS,” said the mouse, “the world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stand the trap that I must run into.” You only need to change your direction,” said the cat, and ate it up.<sup>16</sup>

Read as an allegory, the narrowing walls that enclose the mouse seem to be synonymous with the reduction of the plural possible significations inherent in metaphor. To run into the “trap” might be equated with the misguided (and in the mouse’s case, fatal) act of reducing Kafka’s decidedly ambiguous and plural language, to a single, objective and fixed signification. The solution that is revealed at the end of the parable is simply “to change your direction.” With this revelation a dialectical possibility of language seems to be uncovered.

When we consider many of Kafka’s longer and more famous parables, this possibility of pluralistically inclined language seems to resurface in a much more tangible sense. Take the ending of *An Imperial Message*, where we might decrypt a latent discussion of the author’s unusual and complex rhetoric, encoded, as usual, in terms of allegory:

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<sup>16</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.445. Print.

...still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; he must next fight his way down the stair; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed ; and after the courts the second outer palace; and once more stairs and courts; and once more another palace...and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate – but never, never can that happen – the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man.<sup>17</sup>

The purportedly endless journey from the inner palace to the outer palace to the courts and so on seems to suggest a sort of *mise en abyme* structure – an infinitely refracting series of congruous obstacles that prevent the messenger from carrying the word of the emperor to the outside world. This can be read as a comment on the author’s own convoluted language, the impenetrability of his allegory but also the multiplicity of its layers and potential interpretations. It is the ambiguity denoted by literal status of Kafka’s semantics that frustrate the reader’s efforts to extract any fixed or definite signification from his story. Given its subject (Untertanen), the text clearly deals with issues of transmission, yet it is the details of this transmission that have been obscured by the text’s parabolic polysemy. The semantic surfaces of the text—an emperor sending a message—allegorically point to the process of reading, which in turn reflects back on the process of writing. In this allegorical movement, everything spirals endlessly inwards towards the abyssal and unreachable dichotomy of consciousness, as the author plumbs the depths of an ever-alluring but inevitably unfathomable signification.

In this sense, Kafka’s writing is a world that is “crammed, bursting with its own sediment [Bodensatz]”—a term that seems to be referring to these half-empty rhetorical

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<sup>17</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.5. Print.

structures that continually circumscribe and thus facilitate an endless approach to the ever-elusive meaning of the text. It is the apparent plurality of the text's allegorical suggestions that denote the text's ambiguity and complicates his reader's interpretative efforts. This is the difficulty inherent in the unremitting movement of Kafka's dialectical writing—a difficulty that seems to prompt the penultimate line of the text: “Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet, the question remains whether this plurality of signification can succeed in achieving a fuller, more meaningful text for Kafka, or whether it is simply an impediment to meaning. [quote on Begley, Indeed...] The closing sentence of the parable might suggest a kind of redemption for this kind of language that relies not on the rigidity of the author's motives, but instead on the fluidity of the readers' inferences. In their popular translation, *Kafka: The Complete Stories*, Willa and Edwin Muir render this last sentence in English as follows: “But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.” This translation may fall short of the original German in that the verb used by Kafka, *erträumen*, translated as dream, has another meaning built into it that is not encompassed by its English counterpart. The meaning of *erträumen* is both to dream and something like “to fantasize” or “to make up.” If we consider this latter connotation of the verb—a polysemy in itself, which could be seen as enacting an argument on behalf of interpretative polysemy—the last two lines could be read as something like: “Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and fabricate it for yourself [*erträumst sie dir*].” In this

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<sup>18</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.5. Print.

reading, the plurality of language becomes not an impediment to the author's work or a harbinger of failure, but the very crux of the work and the emancipating—and even beautiful—potential of language that the author means to capture in his text. Like the “trees in the snow,” it is this act of critical interpretation that sets the work “rolling.”

With a linguistic allegory in mind—one that concerns the general act of transmission, whether between word and referent, or between a text/author and reader—we might now turn to Kafka's *Before the Law*, the parable that appears near the end of Kafka's novel, *The Trial*.

Before the law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. “It is possible,” says the doorkeeper, “but not at the moment.” Since the gate stands open, as usual, and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man stoops to peer through the gateway into the interior. Observing that, the doorkeeper laughs and says: “If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that I cannot bear to look at him.” These are difficulties the man from the country had not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides to that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted, and wearies the doorkeeper by his importunity. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with him, asking him questions about his home and many other things, but the questions are all put indifferently, as great lords put them, and always finish with the statement that he cannot be let in yet. The man, who has furnished himself with many things for his journey, sacrifices all he has, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always with the remark: “I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything.” During these years the man fixes his attention almost continuously on the doorkeeper. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him the sole obstacle preventing access to the Law. He curses his bad luck, in his early years boldly and loudly; later, as he grows old, he only grumbles to himself. He becomes childish, and since his yearlong contemplation of the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar. He begs the fleas as well to help him and to change the doorkeeper's mind. At length his eyesight begins to fail and he does not know whether the world is really darker or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably

from the gateway of the Law. Now he has not very long to live. Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper. He waves him nearer, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend low toward him, for the difference in height between them has much altered to the man's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper; "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the man, "so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?" The doorkeeper recognizes that the man has reached his end, and, to let his failing senses catch the words, roars [brüllt] in his ear: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. "I am now going to shut it."<sup>19</sup>

What is at stake in Kafka's fable is epistemological or, perhaps more precisely, hermeneutical certainty and, as in *An Imperial Message*, the odds seem rather stacked against it. Like the reader of a text, the man approaches the gateway to the Law expecting admittance to it. Denied, the man is merely spurred on by his failure. He plies the Doorkeeper with a series of questions proceeding in logical fashion. Ultimately, they will be to no avail as each attempt is met continually with the programmed response of the doorkeeper that "he cannot be let in yet"—an answer given with all the fixity of textual inscription, as if to suggest an allegory of textual exegesis. The root of this failure of the man to be admitted, however, should not be attributed to the soundness of the logic he employs; instead it seems to be a condition of interpretative or perhaps linguistic deferral that is central to this text—one that is related to the *mise en abyme* structure that we have observed in *An Imperial Message* and that seems to both elicit and eclipse the primary signification of *Before The Law*.

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<sup>19</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.3. Print.

To better approach these notions, we must consider the general topography of an allegory of reading within the text.<sup>20</sup> In order to lend coherence to a linguistic or hermeneutical allegory, it is necessary also to situate the relation of the doorkeeper and to both the Law and the man seeking entry to it. He responds to the traveller's pleas but only with the indifference of "great lords." His "long, thin black Tartar beard" tells of age, perhaps, suggesting the longevity and posterity of textual and literary mediums. Additionally, at the end of the story, as the man has grown old, "The doorkeeper has to bend low toward him, for the difference in height between them has much altered to the man's disadvantage," while the doorkeeper is immune to the ravaging effects of time and, thus, purports a posthumous authority that outlives its author, literally (textually), in the fixity of its inscription. (Bearing this in mind, one might recall the penultimate line of *An Imperial Message*: "Nobody could fight his way through here, even with a message from a dead man.")

Like the authority figure of the emperor (and his message), authorial certainty of the *Law* is barred from Kafka's reader. It is in this sense that the *ontological* difficulty that Steiner defines is the very condition of these writings. If the doorkeeper were, in fact, the impasse that prevents the man from knowing the *Law*, he is also the guarantor of this difficulty in the text. As such, he should be equated with the obscurity of Kafka's impenetrable rhetoric and its illusory significations. In other words, he can be seen as

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<sup>20</sup> One should note that discussion of language in Kafka (particularly in his parables) seems to be localized within the liminal zone of the gateway that is also (fittingly) the site of all discourse in these texts (*The Departure*, *An Imperial Message*<sup>20</sup>, *The Homecoming*—texts that seem to be predominated by ruminations on language) This gateway might then be seen as the textual medium which stands in between the author's motive for the work and the reader's deduction of it. The doorkeeper, accordingly being associated with guarding the entryway might appear as the difficult and obscure rhetoric of the text.

representing Kafka's language in his position as mediator between the author's intentions and the reader's interpretative capacity.

The Tartar beard equally seems to link the doorkeeper to a sort of mystic defiance of Western thought, suggesting perhaps Kafka's skepticism about the optimism and the possibility of certainty posited by Enlightenment ideas. But, as Derrida remarks, the relation of the doorkeeper to the law seems, on first inspection, to mirror Kant's categorical imperative,<sup>21</sup> which would call for the subordination of the individual to the universal. If the assumption of Kant's philosophical standpoint holds true, then the singular should provide access to the universal; just as we expect a text to yield an essential truth, the man expects to be granted admittance to the Law.

Yet, in *Before the Law* this is not the case. The stick that has been tossed in the spokes of Kantian hermeneutics is what Derrida terms *Différance*—or the act of deferral. This is the import of the doorkeeper who responds always, "It is possible but not at the moment," neither denying nor admitting the man but merely frustrating and, thus, extending his logical pursuit of the Law. However, it is with the final revelation of the text, "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you," that the Kantian paradigm of the singular that yields access to the general is turned on its head. If the gateway to the Law (the universal) is different for every man, then the universal is instead subordinated to the individual. The resulting logical paradox in which subjectivity dominates any possibility of the absolute, the objective or the universal is enacted as the man is denied admittance to the law. What we have, then, is the inversion of the customary relation between reader and text. It is no longer simply the reader who

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<sup>21</sup> This is one of Derrida's key insights in *Acts of Literature*.

analyzes the text, but what might be called a negotiation between the objectivity of the latter and the subjective import of the former.

According to Derrida's theory, it is the *différance* of the text – the deferral of any climax or resolution within the text—that is the source of this realignment in the relation between text and reader. If the door to the law is made “only for you”—that is to say, it is inherently singular—then the Law the man seeks is also of a singular and personal nature. Thus, from a literary theorist's perspective, any attempt at deriving the Law is no longer akin to deriving a signified from a signifier (as is the norm within linguistic or semiotic structures), but is instead a question of two signifiers that are placed in opposition (abyme and contre-abyme), both of which look to the other to furnish their own meaning in a process of endless refraction and deferral. The result, as Derrida suggests, is a *mise en abyme*—an endless and impenetrable circularity of logic and a digressive obsession with minutiae: “Since his yearlong contemplation of the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar.” All the same, this spectral process, as understood by Derrida, is one of marked and endless futility; it will not bring the man any closer to understanding or reaching “the law.” Yet, there remains the issue of the “radiance” perceived by the man as he nears the end of his sojourn, which would suggest that perhaps there exists some sort of redemption for meaning outside the pessimism and significant nullification that is entailed by Derrida's *différance jusqu'au mort*.

Part of the genius of Kafka's work is that the process of *différance* that is seen as the man from the country attempts to reason his way into the Law is repeated by Kafka's reader himself, who is forced to attempt a similar process of hermeneutical process in gauging the meaning of the parable. Like the man before the Law, the critic who combs



the minute details of the text might equally be stumped. This experience is captured in David Foster Wallace's remarks on Kafka, which echo the latter author's imagery from *Before the Law*.

You can...imagine his art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission but needing it, we don't know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door opens ... and it opens outward: we've been inside what we wanted all along.<sup>22</sup>

The indication of the last line of Wallace's comments appears to suggest exactly the inversion of the traditionally assumed relationship between text and reader that we have just discussed ("this door was made only for you"). Furthermore, Wallace's comments elucidate the way in which this inversion anticipates the reader and his critical deconstruction of the text.

Kafka too seems to be aware of this effect of the text, as he slyly inserts the parable into his novel, *The Trial*, rendering the parable—itsself an exercise in hermeneutics—an object of textual exegesis. The effect of this interweaving and juxtaposition of texts, convoluted like its explanation, being a second degree (mimicking the relation of the man from the country to the *Law*) of placing in opposition of *abime* and *contre-abime* – a relation that bears the semblance of the primordial linguistic relation of signifier and signified yet plays on the notion of a signifier that it is faced only with another signifier and thus the refraction of itself—again, an effective *mise en abyme* and the root of Derrida's "*différance*." The ostensible output of this relationship is a sort of self-reflexive rhetorical demonstration of an *intertextual* dialogue (the meanings of the

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<sup>22</sup> Wallace, David F. "Laughing with Kafka." *Harpers Magazine* 1 July 1998: 26-27. Web. 15 Apr. 2012.

two texts seem to fuse into one another) imbued by the proximity – literally the context of the works. And in this sense, then, the reader of *The Trial*—as Wallace’s remarks suggest— represents a third degree of spectral reflection. He or she becomes an interpreter of one interpreter (Joseph K.) of another interpreter (the man from the country), resulting in a seemingly endless chain of signifiers.

A greater sense of clarity may be found by returning to the second degree of interpretation—the scene of textual exegesis in *The Trial*, which occurs when Joseph K. encounters the priest in the cathedral. We may find that this passage is of considerable importance in understanding the difficulty of hermeneutics in Kafka’s text and the meaning that the author intended his reader to arrive at (the third interpretative degree). In presenting the tale, Before *the Law*, to Joseph K. what the priest seems to suggest are the dynamic and dialectal possibilities of interpretation that are inherent in the parable. Having told the story, the priest delineates between alternate readings of the parable, ascribing to it all the hermeneutical significance of a religious scripture (“I have told you the story in the very words of the scriptures.”<sup>23</sup>).

The first reading, suggested by Joseph K., maintains that the doorkeeper has deceived the man from the country in that he yields “the message of salvation”<sup>24</sup> only when it is already too late for the man. Yet the priest is unsatisfied with this reading, citing that there is no mention of such deception in the parable and that the two statements of the doorkeeper (“that he cannot let the man in at the moment” and “that the door was intended only for the man”<sup>25</sup>), do not in fact contradict one another. He scolds

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<sup>23</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.215. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.215. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.215. Print.

Joseph K. for his hasty inferences: “You have not enough respect for the written word, and you are altering the story.”<sup>26</sup> The suggestion of this admonishment appears to be that the ambiguity inherent in the text cannot be so easily circumvented by inductive measures.

The priest goes on to suggest an alternative interpretation of the story, one which would reverse K.’s previous conclusion, by arguing instead that it is rather the doorkeeper who is deceived (“deluded”). The argument for this conclusion is made on the premise that the doorkeeper himself has no knowledge of the law and that “his ideas of the interior are...childish.”<sup>27</sup> For this reason he would come to be seen as subjugated to the man from the country:

...although he is in the service of the Law, his service is confined to this one entrance; that is to say, he serves only this man for whom alone the entrance is intended. On that ground too he is inferior to the man. One must assume that for many years...his service was in a sense an empty formality since he had to wait for the man to come.<sup>28</sup>

With this relationship of subjugation in mind, whether the man is subjugated to the doorkeeper or vice versa, it becomes apparent that a commentary on the relation between text and reader, which we have previously discussed, may be at play. If the first reading of the story, which infers the subjugation of the man to the whims of a deceptive doorkeeper, suggests that reader relies wholly on the text’s divulgence of meaning, the second would suggest the opposite—that the relationship has been inverted and thus the reader generates the meaning of the text (since the doorkeeper—representative of the language of the text in this case—has no understanding of the “interior” of the Law).

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<sup>26</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.215. Print.

<sup>27</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.217. Print.

<sup>28</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.218/9. Print.

However, it becomes increasingly clear that neither of these interpretations is exclusively valid. The priest reminds us that he is merely “showing you [K.] the various opinions concerning the point”<sup>29</sup> and that “the right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude one another.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the two readings of the text together constitute a dialectic concerning the relation of text and reader—one that suggests not the inversion of the former (paradigmatic) reading relation, but the coexistence of both. In other words, the meaning of the text is neither based wholly within the text or the reader inclusively, but it is rather a negotiation of these elements. In this compositive view, the text may start out as the object of exegesis; but within this discursive and dialectical movement, the focus then shifts to the reader, who becomes the subject *der sich erträumst sie*. As the priest has informed the defendant, “the verdict is not suddenly arrived at, the proceedings only gradually merge into the verdict.”<sup>31</sup>

But Joseph K., like the man seeking entry to the Law in the parable, fails to comprehend the priest's message.

“A melancholy conclusion,” said K. “It turns lying into a universal principle.”  
K. said that with finality, but it was not his final judgment. He was too tired to survey all the conclusions arising from the story, and the trains of thought into which it was leading him were unfamiliar, dealing with impalpabilities better suited to a theme for discussion among Court officials than for him. The simple story had lost its clear outline...the priest...now accepted his comment in silence, although undoubtedly he did not agree with it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.217. Print.

<sup>30</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.216. Print.

<sup>31</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.211. Print.

<sup>32</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.221. Print.

Joseph K.'s mistake—his inability to understand these “impalpabilities”—is intertwined with the very “finality” with which he arrives at his conclusion. In his insistence on certainty, Kafka's protagonist misses the essential argument of the priest that “it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.”<sup>33</sup> The truth of the text—if it can be deemed as such—cannot come into being as a fixed or finalized interpretation; it must arise as a discursive and epistemological understanding of how the text is capable of generating different meanings.

The question that remains, then, is whether failure is a necessary component of the *ontological* condition of Kafka's text—if K's fated failure is necessarily enmeshed with the failure of Kafka's meaning? Or on the other hand, if there is a way to circumvent the futility of its paradoxically dynamic nature. Despite the pessimistic conclusions that are elaborated in these texts, (this is perhaps a warning flag as rarely is anything that is truly meaningful presented clearly in Kafka's works) there is perhaps still hope for the redemption of Kafka and his apparent, even, self-proclaimed failure—but hope of a different kind.

This possibility is perhaps intimated in yet another of Kafka's parables. In *The Vulture*, one of his more baffling and enigmatic short stories, a man—presumably an authorial figure—is torn to shreds by an unforgiving raptor.

A VULTURE was hacking at my feet. It had already torn my boots and stockings to shreds, now it was hacking at the feet themselves. Again and

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<sup>33</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1968. P.220. Print.

again it struck at them, then circled several times restlessly around me, then returned to continue its work.<sup>34</sup>

If one's first inclination is to see the first-person narrator as Kafka himself, besieged by the forces conspiring against him, there is another way to approach this story—one that is likely to be closer to Kafka's intent. In this view, the image of the vulture circling its prey is akin to the author, or to language that [rhetorically] circumscribes its targeted signification. Of course, this is a potent image for Kafka who presents the hermeneutical and in some sense, the linguistic pursuit of meaning as a process of asymptotic futility. Like the vulture, Kafka's fiction can be seen as an endless dance around and encircling the *Unrettbar Reden* of the text, employing rhetorical devices that resist any sort of certainty of immediate clarity.

Yet within the final lines of the story, there is a possible resolution to Kafka's abysmal and seemingly fated failure.

During this conversation the vulture had been calmly listening, letting its eye rove between me and the gentlemen. Now I realized that it had understood everything; it took wing, leaned far back to gain impetus, and then, like a javelin thrower, thrust its beak through my mouth, deep into me. Falling back, I was relieved to feel him drowning irretrievably in my blood, which was filling every depth, flooding every shore.<sup>35</sup>

If this passage is read as a kind of redemptive respite, then its signification is necessarily two-fold (true to Kafka's penchant for dialectics). Firstly, it implies the death of the authorial figure and asserts the impotence, and the impossibility of signification. And yet, the vulture no longer circles its prey in futility; it has finally hit its mark. How can we

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<sup>34</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.442. Print.

<sup>35</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.3. Print.

reconcile these contradicting analyses? The answer comes from a notion that seems to pervade the essence of Kafka as a writer, *Aufhebung* (sublation) – the coupling of thesis and anti-thesis. Thus the resolution of the text is possibly that in acknowledging the inability of the author to attain the irretrievable and the unfathomable, he has hit upon the most potent truth of his text; paradoxically his failure is the very attainment of his goal and his ultimate success, amounting to a dialectical signification that captures the constant and uncertain movement of a polysemically driven epistemological dialogue.

The concept of *Aufhebung* could also be used to lend a significative coherence to *Before the Law* as well. Due to the apparent wealth (plurality) of deconstructionist interpretations allowed by the text, any critical inference risks crumbling before another. As the doorkeeper warns the man, “If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last.” Part of the difficulty in locating this truth of the text is its resistance to categorization. The profound negativity of a signification revealed only through the negation of meaning and the deferment of interpretive revelation colors Kafka’s illusory message with a philosophical hue. At the same time, it is the formality and constitutionality<sup>36</sup> of the literary work (denoted by said status) that lends the text its authority. In other words, it is the mere pretension to be literature, the form of the narrative itself, that suggests readability just as the existence of language suggests its comprehensibility.

It is perhaps this premise that Kafka draws on in situating the antithesis of a text that professes a formal meaning, yet denies a (fixed or objective) substantive one. The result is a profoundly negative text and an austere and essential literature—one that

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<sup>36</sup> as Derrida suggests in his analysis of the work.

speaks only of literature, of itself (“out of here”). Though etiological inference is notoriously obscured in Kafka’s work, this substantive nihilism seems, also, to be part of the root *différance* in the text. Divorced from its content, form remains an unbound signifier. Thus the derivation of its meaning may appear as the endless digression of the *mise en abyme*—the signifier that signifies the refraction of itself. Yet, having remarked upon this tension between surfaces and substance, we are still no closer to any resolution in the text. We do not know whether to privilege the failure of meaning—the pessimism implicit in Derrida’s *différance*—or the success of an aporetic non-meaning—a tentative hope for communication that is expressed by the eventual “radiance” perceived by the man from the country.

The two sides of this struggle for meaning to exist can be expressed neatly by returning to the dialectic that is set up in *The Trees*.

No, it can’t be done, for they are firmly wedded to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.<sup>37</sup>

The *différance* of the text and the impossibility of communication that it implies is certainly a facet of Kafka’s text—yet, to assume that it eclipses all possibility of meaning in his works is to ignore the counterpart of the dialectic. As I have suggested, it is a shift in perspective that allow for a coherent and essential signification to take form in Kafka’s work. Instead of placing the tensions of the text in opposition—form and content, objective and subjective meaning(s), and most importantly, the pessimism of *différance* and the tentative hope expressed in the parables—it is necessary to view them as two sides of a dialectic that together form a cohesive whole and represent the fullness of both

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<sup>37</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.382. Print.



objectively fixed, and fluidly polysemic language—of the failure of meaning and the success of a rhetorical or approximate truth.

With that said, one might ask, whether Kafka's critics might have missed something essential in his work. The reason that they consider him a failure may be, simply, that they sought an answer from his work, when, in truth, its primary signification was to elicit a question: Can the very fluidity, ambiguity and dynamic polysemy of a text be paradoxically reduced to its objective and fixed meaning? And if so, does this alter the quality of K's expression and does it alter what literature can be? These are crucial questions to be considered as an examination of the merits of typically modern expressive modes continues. This chapter must end then—true to the Moderns—with a touch of ambiguity. As Kafka's priest notes, "the proceedings only gradually merge into the verdict."

If it is true that Kafka weaved a latent epistemological discourse within his texts, then we might consider the ways in which his contemporaries might have also contributed to a discussion of language and literary semiotics within their narratives. It is particularly in Proust's immense work, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, that an analogue might be drawn to Kafka's modern sensibilities about language – his mistrust of literal or semantic signification and his penchant for rhetorical approximation. If Kafka's work can be perceived as the enactment of a sort of linguistic or hermeneutical process, Proust's works seems equally to correspond to a similar act of critical reading. In this chapter, I will examine the compatibility of these two modernist linguistic allegories, in search of a common ground that might elucidate the common motivations of these modernist authors and thus help to situate their common goals and, potentially, those of modern literature.

Yet, before we draw too many comparative conclusions, we should look to de Man's text, *Allegories of Reading*—and particularly to his chapter on Proust. This section details a rather complex argument about metaphorical supremacy that the critic will come to negate, though rather hesitantly, on behalf of a sort of critical and linguistic breakdown. According to de Man, Proust's writing is founded on a play of truth and error. This structure (allegorical or otherwise) seems comparable to Kafka's penchant for dialectical tropes that both affirm and negate the semantic value of language. It would seem that the two authors might have shared a mutual textual climate that de Man describes as an “unstable commixture of literalism and suspicion.”<sup>38</sup> This “mood of distrust” may well be attributed to what Steiner calls the “ancient trope of inadequate

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<sup>38</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.58. Print.

discourse, the conceit whereby words fall short of the unique immediacies of individual experience.”

Certainly Proust, who might be seen as delving into the depths of human consciousness and perception, would take issue with this shortcoming of literal, semantic signification to capture that, which is inherently singular. It is for this reason that the author tends toward the use of metaphorical and rhetorical structures within his texts as a means of significant approximation. Yet, we will see that these structures are not immune to the difficulty inherent within the division of meaning and its means of conveyance. As de Man notes, there is a “circular difficulty”<sup>39</sup> that arises in the tension between meaning and its linguistic means that comes to “paralyzes interpretative discourse.”<sup>40</sup>

On a literal level, this climate of distrust is perceivable in Proust’s works; this lesson is imparted to us directly. An emblematic illustration of this semantic distrust occurs with Gilberte’s “indecent gesture,” which takes place in the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time, Swann’s Way*. This action that we—the reader and Marcel—perceive in all the confused modality and sensibility of a young incarnation of our narrator—and which is never actually described in physical terms—is a classic model of misinterpretation of signs within the text. While the young man attributes this gesture to the snobbery of Swann’s daughter, we will discover in the final volume of the series that the motion was in fact intended as more of a sexual invitation. This revisionist significant approach is effectively what de Man describes as a “play between

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<sup>39</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.58. Print.

<sup>40</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.58. Print.

prospective and retrospective movement, an alternating motion that resembles that of reading, or rather that of re-reading.”<sup>41</sup> Effectively, this is what has been deemed (as attributed to Georges Poulet by de Man) “temporal layers” within Proust’s text—a juxtaposition of different narrative modalities in the form of different significations attached to and invested in the same *object* over time.

We have already mentioned the “indecent gesture” as an example. But perhaps the most potent example of the temporal layers of Proust’s text is likely found in the complexity of its narrative structure, more specifically within the reminisces of its dynamic, first-person narrator. The following passage, occurring in the first section of the first volume, is among the most explicit depictions of the multiplicity of narrative figures and temporalities that coexist in the present space of the novel.

But for all that I now knew that I was not in any of those houses of which the ignorance of the waking moment had, in a flash, if not presented me with a distinct picture, at least persuaded me of the possible presence, my memory had been set in motion; as a rule I did not attempt to go to sleep again at once, but used to spend the greater part of my night recalling our life in the old days at Combray with my great-aunt, at Balbec, Paris, Doncieres, Venice, and the rest; remembering again all the places and people I had known, what I had actually seen of them, and what others had told me.<sup>42</sup>

There appears to be at least three distinct versions of “I’s” that occur in this short section. These multiple selves can be differentiated by examining the use of different verbal tenses. There is the “I” of the simple past (“I was not in any of those houses”), which may still be somewhat equated with the imperfect “I” (I did not attempt to go to sleep...but used to spend the greater part of my night...)” Going still further back in time, there is the

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<sup>42</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann’s Way*. Trans. Terence K. Moncrieff and C.K. Scott Moncrieff. United States: Modern Library, 1992. P.9. Print.

pluperfect “I”: “all the places and people I had known, what I had actually seen of them.” Perhaps the most troubling “I,” however, is the first one, which sets up the string of memories. (“I now knew”). There is a subtle contradiction in this structure which seems to profess to be speaking in the present (with its use of “now”), yet in past tense (“knew”) at the same time. This conflation of the past and present is indicative of the temporal multiplicity of Proust’s narration.

Thus, the facets of the narrator’s world—his mother’s kiss, the paths he traversed, the multiple figures of Swann and of our narrator—are assimilated by an exterior authorial consciousness. Like threads of memory, they tangle into one another until what, at one point, was a firm material reality becomes a web of abstract ideas connected by the invisible fibers that hold together our associations of the object. This invisible web that forms Proustian consciousness captures the imprint of the image, and subordinates it to a larger conception of the whole that is built by the layering of these impressions.

The derivation of these temporal layers might best be explained in acknowledging an undeniable precept of the author’s work—the idealizing process that is inherent in both memory and in perception. In Proust’s writing the transmission of an idea or the formation of a memory bears the indelible imprint of the narrator’s fingerprints. Fertilized by his imaginative powers, reflections of people, nature and places outgrow their former unadorned selves; they extend beyond their material (or, one might say, semantic) bounds, now brimming with a newly found significance.

This process of consciousness that infiltrates, alters and idealizes the elements it perceives is suggested by the scene of the “magic lantern,” which occurs in the first section of *Swann’s Way*.

If the lantern were moved I could still distinguish Golo's horse advancing across the window-curtains, swelling out with their curves and diving into their folds. The body of Golo himself, being of the same supernatural substance as his steed's, overcame every material obstacle—everything that seemed to bar his way—by taking it as an ossature and absorbing it into himself: even the doorknob—on which, adapting themselves at once, his red cloak or his pale face, still as noble and as melancholy, floated invincibly—would never betray the least concern at this transvertebration.<sup>43</sup>

The projection of Golo and his steed, with all their “supernatural substance,” onto the “material obstacles” of the narrator's walls provides a clear metaphor for the mutability of the idealization process involved in consciousness and perception. The materiality of the object remains a mere “ossature,” a skeleton to be filled out and absorbed by the fluid currents of human feeling.<sup>44</sup>

This idealization of his the subjects he observes and the dynamic fluidity of their perception arises within “the shifting and confused gusts of memory”<sup>45</sup> that comprise his reflections on his youth. As Proust writes in the early pages of this first volume:

Perhaps the immobility of things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them.<sup>46</sup>

The general instability of perception is a clear tenet of the work's philosophical implications. Yet, another issue to be explored in his text is the way in which this uncertain movement of meaning, perception and memory are translated into the linguistic

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<sup>43</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Trans. Terence K. Moncrieff and C.K. Scott Moncrieff. United States: Modern Library, 1992. P.11. Print.

<sup>44</sup> It might be of use to briefly note that this image would be equally suited to a metaphor for linguistic structures—particularly the classic semiotic relation of signifier and signified. Just as Golo and his steed fill out the contours of young Marcel's walls, the singularity of an intended meaning (the signified) is projected onto the rigid exterior of language (the signifier).

<sup>45</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Trans. Terence K. Moncrieff and C.K. Scott Moncrieff. United States: Modern Library, 1992. P.5. Print.

<sup>46</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Trans. Terence K. Moncrieff and C.K. Scott Moncrieff. United States: Modern Library, 1992. P.5. Print.

structures of the text. Within the literarily enacted semiotic relationship of memory and language, a hermeneutical and critical mistrust emerges—one that mirrors the suspicion of discord between subject and object that is inherent in the “...mobility of things” engendered by the modality of the text’s temporal layers.

De Man’s argument eventually (though hesitantly) abandons any semantic or literal readings of the text in favor of a paradigmatic one. That is to say, his reading is based not on any of the text’s substantive revelations, but on the rhetorical structures that comprise them and their relation to this meaning that they contain. The primary assertion of De Man’s text is of a discord between “literal” and “thematic” significations within the text. The critic suggests that

Proust can affect such confidence in the persuasive power of his metaphors that he pushes stylistic defiance to the point of stating the assumed synthesis of light and dark in the incontrovertible language of numerical ratio.<sup>47</sup>

He goes on to quote an example of this “stylistic defiance” in Proust: “the dark cool of my warm room was to the full sunlight of the street what the shadow is to the sunray, that is to say equally luminous.” The “incontrovertible language” here is comprised by analogical tropes, yet compromised by its substantive antithesis; apart from the abortive analogical claim which likens the luminosity of a “shadow” to that of a “sunray,” we might note the nonsensical pairing of “the dark cool of my warm room.” Thus, if we ignore the semantic content of the text and privilege the tropic and rhetorical forms, the significative structure seems to hold (“there are no limits to what tropes can get away

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<sup>47</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.62. Print.

with”<sup>48</sup>). Yet under the reader’s scrutiny of its own semantic value and reasoning (its lack of logical cohesion), the analogy breaks down. As de man goes on to say,

Structures and relays of this kind, in which properties are substituted<sup>49</sup> and exchanged, characterize tropological systems as being, at least in part, paradigmatic or metaphorical systems. Not surprisingly, therefore, the introductory passage on reading ... was placed, from the beginning, under the auspices of truth and error.<sup>50</sup>

The irresolution of the dual significations is a harbinger of both an epistemological doubt (a “mood of [linguistic] distrust”) and of a tension that we have already seen in Kafka’s texts (particularly in *Before the Law*) between a stylistic or formal surface that professes meaning and, a logical impasse that denies one.

A similar argument can be made for Giotto’s frescoes in all of their allegorical significations. Many critics will argue that in order for the frescoes to bear a perceivable and attainable value, they must be imbued with a “semantic intensity” by means of allegorical detail and icons. But this representational power of these frescoes seems to fall short as we do not know whether to privilege the literal or ascribed value (in this case denoted by the inscription of “*caritas*” on the painting) or its formal and purely representational value. The result is a “dissonance” of “proper” and “literal” significations within the allegory, as “the two meanings fight it out with all the blind power of stupidity.”<sup>51</sup> De Man elaborates on this point as follows:

...it seems that the author has lost confidence in the effectiveness of the substitutive power generated by the resemblances: he states a proper meaning, directly or by way of an intra-textual code or tradition, by using

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<sup>48</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.62. Print.

<sup>49</sup> referring to analogical or metaphorical structures, but this can also be applied to the general act of semiosis

<sup>50</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.66. Print.

<sup>51</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.76. Print.



a literal sign which bears no resemblance to that meaning and which conveys, in its turn, a meaning that is proper to it but does not coincide with the proper meaning of the allegory. The facial expression of the “heavy and mannish” matron painted by Giotto connotes nothing charitable...<sup>52</sup>

Thus the difficulty of these passages appears to be synonymous with the “circular difficulty” which the critic has previously mentioned, and perhaps with Derrida’s concept of *différance*, as we have already applied the term to Kafka. It seems to be this (hermeneutically) paralytic suspension of meaning between stylistic and substantive elements that provokes de Man’s conclusion that Proust’s “allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading.”<sup>53</sup>

Earlier on in the same chapter, de Man links the seductive powers of metaphor to the dual “iridescence” and “immobility” of the image of the fountain that recurs throughout *In Search of Lost Time*. The harmonizing effect of this metaphor (effectively for metaphorical signification) lends at least the illusion of stability to the apparent arbitrariness of analogical and rhetorical substitution processes such as metonymy, allegory or metaphor. In de Man’s words,

The miraculous interference of water and light in the refracted rainbow of the color spectrum make its appearance throughout the novel, infallibly associated with the thematics of metaphor as totalization. It is the perfect analogon for complementarity, the differences that make up the parts absorbed in the unity of the whole as the colors of the spectrum are absorbed in the original white light.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, in this vision of unity that is conjured by Proust, elements that are substituted in metaphor appear to be bounded by an established ontological proximity and a natural

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<sup>52</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.74. Print.

<sup>53</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.72. Print.

<sup>54</sup> de Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. United States: Yale University, 1979. P.71. Print.

complementarity (what de Man calls “necessity”). But, by the end of his analysis (having been confronted by the “auspices” of truth and error), the critic reduces this transcendent experience to “a mere association of ideas.” In his words, “the relationship between the literal and figurative senses of the metaphor is always, in this sense, metonymic, though motivated by a constitutive tendency to pretend the opposite.”

Thus subjected to the epistemological enquiry of the critic, the fountain is reduced to “a much more disturbing movement, a vibration between truth and error that keeps the two readings from ever converging.” In this fashion, the “impossibility of reading” is reasserted. As de Man turns his back on the once apparently seductive power of the fountain, he ends by suggesting that it, now, as an emblem of epistemological uncertainty, “functions like an oxymoron” or an “aporia”—that is, a rhetorical expression of doubt. Yet, the question remains whether the simultaneous inclusion of seemingly colluding readings might be possible. The fountain metaphor may well have a more inclusive totalizing effect that de Man did not anticipate – one that could truly lend coherency to the dual assertions of the text.

The negative “aporia” that we are left with is indeed a critical or interpretative dead end. On the other hand, it could be viewed as representing the enactment of a negative epistemological movement—an assertion of the impossibility of metaphor or allegory— that is suggested by the text and enacted in its critical deconstruction (whether this is done by the text itself as de Man posits, or by a critic’s act of interpretation). Yet, the real success of the metaphor goes beyond the mere rhetorical signification of a negative epistemology (to put it rather more simply, that element of doubt that appears to be part of any assertion and affirmation in Proust’s texts). But the remarkable effect of

Proust's work, which is achieved in scenes of transcendence like those involving the Madeleine or Vinteuil's sonata, is the extent to which it seems to overcome such doubt, if only momentarily. In so doing Proust achieves an effect whereby the subordination of the prevailing sense of fallibility to a brief moment of truth amounts to the simultaneous positioning and undoing of its primary epistemological premise.

This subordination is of a part to the whole, and suggests, now, the containment of error within truth and thus sets up the larger structure of the novel as a coherent whole. Proust even suggests that failure, far from establishing the impossibility of truth, instead works to enhance its eventual emergence.

While the kitchen-maid—who, all unawares, made the superior qualities of Françoise shine with added lustre, just as Error, by force of contrast, enhances the triumph of Truth—served coffee which (according to Mamma) was nothing more than hot water...<sup>55</sup>

Instead of a “vibration between truth and error”—a phrase that might be more accurately attributed to Kafka's significant ambivalence—what we seem to have in Proust's texts is an effective deferment of error, a suspension of skepticism to a larger structure that might denote the truth of the text (thus, a supplementary and not a complementary relationship). It is, thus, within the juxtaposition of the kitchen-maid and Françoise and the products of their service—the hot water compared to coffee—that this relation is elucidated.

To be sure, moments of misinterpretation along with the breakdown of tropic and rhetorical devices are unmasked as moments of error within the text. But such moments and the doubt they inspire are not meant to have any reliable autonomy of discourse and

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<sup>55</sup> Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. Trans. Terence K. Moncrieff and C.K. Scott Moncrieff. United States: Modern Library, 1992. P.113. Print.

must be subordinated to the larger structure of the text. This is the nature of the text's "temporal layers" that flatten the discourse of truth and error to one of an eventual truth by having erred.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the errors of the text are to its truth what the heterogeneous and individual colors of light are to the entire spectrum; it is the individual colors, that in their totality—the completeness of their integration—form the homogenous totality of white light.<sup>57</sup> It is equally in this sense that the *absolute distance* between the omniscience of the author (as truth) and the apparent modality of its different narrators (as error) might be dissolved within this spectral illusion of coherence, unity and truth.

To affirm this general structure of subordination and, thus, the possibility of reliable signification, we might return to our previous discussion of Gilberte's "indecent gesture" and the rectification of its significance in the final volume of the series, *Time Regained*. If the first volumes are symbolic of error—and it is interesting to note that almost all of De Man's argument for a reading allegory comes from *Swann's Way*—then it is possible to see the errors of the young author as having been righted by the final volume, as the author and narrative figure comes to realize his potential as a writer. Indeed, the titular optimism of this final volume certainly does not suggest a prominence of notions such as error, and interpretative analysis that abound within earlier sections of the text. Furthermore, the author seems to have retraced his steps, now offering a revised truth that does not present itself with the same dangerous hermeneutical uncertainty that de Man has uncovered in *Swann's Way*. The enactment of this revision is signified primarily by Gilberte's long awaited explanation of her gesture that is deferred until the

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<sup>56</sup> It would seem to me that this more generalized perspective would be a more appropriate fit for Proust's fountain metaphor (as opposed to it being an emblem simply of metaphorical prowess or, alternatively, impotence.)

last volume of the set. Thus, near the culminating term of the series, time is “regained.” At least some errors of perception are set right and, in this process, we witness the coming of age of Marcel. In this sense, the totality of *In Search of Lost time* depicts an epistemological derivation of authorial truth and the concomitant success of Proust (or the narrator, Marcel) as an author of great fiction.

Now, having considered Proust’s text as an allegory of reading, what demonstrable connections can be formed between it and Kafka’s epistemological sensibility? If we are to take Paul de Man’s claims seriously, then, Proust’s series takes on a similar function to that of, say, Kafka’s *Before the Law* in that it raises fundamental question about epistemological and linguistic uncertainty. In the same way that Kafka’s text leaves his reader scratching his head (as an enactment of hermeneutical folly), Proust’s raises key questions about what constituted a work of literature and to what degree any semiotic and linguistic relays are capable of any sort of semantic certainty.

Thus, in both authors’ works we observe a fundamental tension between the its form, which suggest readability and, indeed, professes a meaning, and a substantive aporia that denies one—a tension that threatens at any moment to nullify any possibility of truth within the text. It would seem that this modern sensibility about language might be related to a general climate of mistrust of language and general skepticism about Enlightenment ideals that had invested reason with an infallible power to deduce truth (we have seen that Kant’s logic falls far short when faced with logical impasse of *Before the Law*).

This statement can be supported by the argument that both texts (Kafka’s and Proust’s) seem to hinge on a dialectic of truth and error—the success or the failure of

language itself. This is the primary indication of the interpretation of Kafka's, *The Vulture* that I have postulated in the previous chapter. The readings of the passage that I offer amount exactly to a signification and a significative pairing of truth and error. That is to say, the man who is torn to shreds can be viewed as a failure—one that represents the death of the authorial figure and subsequent failure of signification. Despite the pessimism of the reading it is still possible to salvage the success of meaning and of signification in the image of the (no longer circling) vulture that has finally hit its mark. Coherence is lent to this tale, as it is in Proust's novels, by a subordination—but not annihilation—of one reading to another. Thus, this notion of *sublation* that entails the containment of failure as a necessary facet within a dialectic that contains the fullness of an enactment of epistemological truth and error, is perhaps as relevant to Proust as it is to Kafka.

## Henry James's Secret

“I don't quite know how to explain it to you,” he said, “but it was the very fact that your notice of my book had a spice of intelligence, it was just your exceptional sharpness, that produced the feeling — a very old story with me, I beg you to believe — under the momentary influence of which I used in speaking to that good lady the words you so naturally resent. I don't read the things in the newspapers unless they're thrust upon me as that one was — it's always one's best friend who does it! But I used to read them sometimes — ten years ago. I dare say they were in general rather stupider then; at any rate it always struck me they missed my little point with a perfection exactly as admirable when they patted me on the back as when they kicked me in the shins. Whenever since I've happened to have a glimpse of them they were still blazing away — still missing it, I mean, deliciously. YOU miss it, my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance; the fact of your being awfully clever and your article's being awfully nice doesn't make a hair's breadth of difference. It's quite with you rising young men,” Vereker laughed, “that I feel most what a failure I am!”<sup>58</sup>

In these opening lines of *The Figure in the Carpet*, Henry James's protagonist, Vereker, intimates to a young critic that his work harbors a hidden meaning. As the conversation continues, the fictional author insists that this secret is “the fullest intention of the lot” and “a triumph of patience and ingenuity [that] stretches...from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it.” He goes even further in suggesting that “The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> James, Henry. *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986. P.1. Print.

<sup>59</sup> James, Henry. *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1986. P.1. Print.

(all quotations in this paragraph)

Is it possible that Vereker's musings are more than simply a disposable fiction—that, in fact, they might tell us something about the latent motives of James himself? This, of course, is a difficult—if not impossible—claim to make. The task of identifying this hidden meaning with any certainty is even more problematic. However, modern readings of James's work suggest that there is, in fact, a latent discourse that is submerged beneath the surfaces of his texts and its focal intrigue, lying dormant for the critic to stagger upon. In much of James's work, there is an uncanny sense of an uncertain and uneasy meaning that resists the reader. Certainly the ambiguity of the text, its interpretative impenetrability and epistemological uncertainty are core tenets of the text. As in Kafka's writing, these tropes elaborate a concealed discourse about writing, linguistic transmission, and critical interpretation that constitute a sort of allegorical enactment of hermeneutical uncertainty. Could it be, thus, that this latent discussion of language is James' secret? Certainly, the image of "cheese in a mouse-trap" and "bait on a hook" suggests a kind of epistemological dilemma that we have seen in Kafka (we find the exact image of the mouse trap in Kafka's *A Little Fable*). The genius of James' secret is, then, perhaps that it is the elaboration of a paradox that renders it ever elusive to the critic. Even, if we are to say that we have faltered upon this meaning—the uncertainty of an inherently ambiguous and plural language—we have already reduced it by ascribing to that which is necessarily metaphorical and plural a literal value and fallen into the very trap that we have attempted to identify. Like Kafka, James seems to have stumbled upon the allure of the *unsayable* and of a meaning that is as irreducible as the language from which it is derived—only a little more than a decade earlier.

However, *The Figure in the Carpet*, does not divulge this secret; it merely points to it. (In this sense, the story is akin to Hofmannsthal's *Letter to Lord Chandos* in its



literal directness—that is, its meaning is not so elaborately veiled within allegory.) It is rather in James' *Turn of the Screw* that we find what is probably the most masterfully constructed allegory for polysemical language, and the interpretative difficulties (impossibility) it engenders. The enigmatic status of the text is derived, as it is in Kafka's parables, from its anticipation of its own critical reception. A technique aimed at subverting its critic—one that can equally be related to an allegorical discussion of linguistic transmission—is the text's narrative structure: its three-fold chain of unreliable narrators that serves to undermine the certainty of each successive link in the series. What we have, then, is an account of a recounting of an account of an experience: An unnamed man narrates the introduction (as the group of listeners are gathered "round the fire"). He will soon come to narrate Douglas's telling of the story, who is reading the manuscript of the governess that is written as a first-person report – itself a sort interpretation of the events that she experiences.

The central plot itself consists of the experience of a young woman who takes a position as a governess to two young children, Miles and Flora. Her task is to manage the pair at the summer estate, Bly Manor, and is given with the stipulation that she must, under no circumstances, communicate with or involve her employer in handling her administrative duties. During her time at the country estate, she is visited by a pair of apparitions, which, she becomes increasingly convinced, are assailing the children whom she has been charged with protecting. Having conferred with the housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, she comes to learn that ghosts she has seen bear the likeness of two former—and now deceased—servants, Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. She also gathers from her fellow employee that there seems to have been some sort of perverse sexual relationship between the pair of servants and the children; yet these claims remain largely

unconfirmed. Much of her account deals with her own judgment of the situation, wrestling with her uncertainty about whether the children are truly possessed, and if the spirits she sees are real or if her she herself has descended into madness. The story climaxes as she forces a confession from young Miles, and as she names the ghost of Peter Quint in front of the boy. With the utterance of the deceased man's name, the boy is smothered to death in the governess's arms and the tale ends.

If James had simply decided to tell the tale from the sole perspective of the governess, it would have made for a different story. Standing alone, the transcription of events that was passed down to Douglas might hold together as a credible realist fiction that would be vulnerable to being reduced as either a Freudian psychoanalysis or a metaphysical struggle against ghastly spirits (we will see that these are the two camps of criticism that emerge shortly after the publication of the tale in 1899). Yet taken with its introduction, the text becomes susceptible to the nonnegotiable ambiguity and suspicion that appears to undermine the Governess's reliability by virtue of the text's narrative layers. We might confirm this with Douglas's admonition in the opening lines of the tale: "The story *won't* tell... 'not in any literal vulgar way.'" In this equating of literal and vulgar, we might recognize an indication of the author's distaste for objective depiction and for communicating his point to his reader outright (although, ironically, literary historians have generally seemed content to classify him as a realist writer—perhaps having missed his secret, the hidden figure in the carpet). It is likely that this is a warning to the critical reader who, by nature, attempts to wrest a fixed and rigid signification from the story and, indeed, an indication of a sort of epistemological uncertainty that will permeate the latent rhetoric and concealed meaning of the story.

In spite of this warning, the story has yielded an immense number of critical responses, the plurality of which is doubtless a symptom of the work's impenetrable ambiguity. In order to establish the epistemological questions that the text presents, it is essential to consider a handful of these perspectives on the tale. Critical receptions of the tale that immediately followed the text's reception can be separated into two mutually exclusive camps. The first would exonerate the governess, in the assertion that the apparitions she perceives are indeed real. The story would thus be read as her struggle against the evil forces that threaten the children she has pledged to protect. The second, however, posits a Freudian deconstruction of the text that insists, instead, on the governess's mental instability and the apparitions of the text as a symptom of her pathological neurosis caused by her repressed love for the master.

Edmund Wilson is the best-known proponent of this latter theory, and indeed he presents a fair amount of evidence to support it. He notes that that the ghost of Peter Quint first appears on a tower—a clear phallic symbol—while the apparition of Mrs. Jessel is first seen by the governess on a lake. He points to the phallic imagery of the stick, that Flora attempts to employ as a mast. The potency and multiplicity of these Freudian motifs, in tandem with the “erotic ambiguities” posed by the text, suggest that James probably placed these images deliberately in his text. Yet, it may be, as Shoshana Felman suggest in her book, *Madness and the Turn of the Screw*, that these tropes were set as a kind of trap to catch the overzealous and “prepossessed” Freudian critic. Indeed, it seems that Wilson has, in fact, stumbled blindly into James' elaborate hermeneutical trap. As we have noted, Wilson's interpretation rests on the assumption that the governess is in love with the master and that the apparitions she encounters are a symptom of her resulting sexual frustration. Yet, when we return to the preface—and to

the warning we have considered earlier—it becomes clear that James has intentionally barred this path of interpretation. Consider the quote in full:

Mrs. Griffin, however, expressed the need for a little more light.  
“who was it she was in love with?”  
“The story will tell,” I took it upon myself to reply. (...).  
“the story won’t tell,” said Douglas; “not in any literal, vulgar way.”<sup>60</sup>

Wilson’s argument hinges directly on fixing the governess’s lover as the master. Thus, in making this assumption as the crux of his interpretation and naming the unnamable, the Freudian critic has done precisely what the preface of the novel has expressly forbidden; he has committed the very offense of which we have been specifically forewarned.

The glaring issue that faces Felman’s analysis, then, is how not to fall into the same trap that has snared Wilson’s attempt at interpretation. How can the later critic posit a plausible reading of the text that preserves the ambiguity and inherent plurality of the text’s significations? The answer to this dilemma for Felman seems to be that she (as she herself notes) orients her criticism not as a response to *what* the meaning of the text is, but rather *how* it conveys its meaning. In this way, the epistemological nature of her argument is brought to light, echoing the similarly epistemological undertones of James’s rhetorically veiled message (and to an extent the epistemological struggle of the governess in trying to confirm the certainty of her apparitions as well). Felman’s comment also hints at the circularity of the language that sustains the author’s (James’s) ambiguity, and that of the critic’s logic in reducing the inherent polysemy of James’s signification. Still the question looms (as Felman puts it): “Is it at all possible to read and interpret ambiguity without reducing it in the very process of interpretation?” In spite of

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<sup>60</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.147. Print.

this hindrance, the critic goes on to make a rather convincing argument on behalf of latent meaning of the text.

Perhaps the most prominent indication of this linguistic or epistemologically minded argument within the text is, as Felman suggests, its chain of “superimposed” narratives, and the chain of readings that they generate in their interpretation of each subsequent layer. The process of transmission and interpretation thus begins at the very outset of the tale. Starting from the inside out, we should look to the most overt interpretative phenomenon in the text – that is, the governess’s attempts at unraveling the mystery of the seemingly possessed children and the apparitions at Bly manor. In this sense, the focal point of the text is itself an exercise of critical interpretation. Like a critic who analyzes James’s text, she pursues the answer to the uncertain predicament of Bly’s ghosts.

In the subsequent voices of narrative, we see that this act of interpretation reflects from one layer to the next. The second link is then in the transmission of the story from the Governess to Douglas in the passing over of the manuscript containing the ghastly account. Typical of the tale, the details of the pair’s relationship are obscured: “ ‘She sent me the pages in question before she died.’ They were all listening now, and of course there was somebody... to draw the inference. But if he put the inference by without a smile it was also without irritation”<sup>61</sup> The inference, as we will see, is that Douglas had been in love with the governess. Yet, as is the custom in the tale, inference is never untouched by doubt; like the “pages in question,” the question of love remains an irresolvable question throughout the tale. We have already seen the example of Wilson defining the governess’ love as the faulty cornerstone of his Freudian reading of the text.

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<sup>61</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.146. Print.

It seems fitting that love becomes such an elusive idea in the text due to its inherently ideal and abstract nature. In a sense, it is the singularity of its point of reference and the polysemy that is thus generated by the word that makes this concept (except perhaps, in a literal or vulgar way) particularly resistant to the commonality and commoditization of language.

Thus, in the following passage we can trace the way in which the governess's love remains stubbornly ambiguous, refusing to be placed outright (between the characters of the text)—and even to be named.

'...I was much there in that year – it was a beautiful one; and we had, in her off-hours, some strolls and talks in the garden – talks in which she struck me as awfully clever and nice. Oh yes; don't grin: I liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too. If she hadn't she wouldn't have told me. She had never told anyone. It wasn't simply that she said so, but that I knew she hadn't. I was sure; I could see. You'll easily judge why when you hear.' ...

'I see. She was in love.'

He laughed for the first time. 'You *are* acute. Yes, she was in love. That is she *had* been. That came out – she couldn't tell her story without its coming out. I saw it, and she saw I saw it; but neither of us spoke of it. I remember ...<sup>62</sup>

In this passage we receive confirmation that the governess "*had*" been in love. Yet, this does not render the issue of whom she loved any less problematic. James's italics here seem to point to the ambiguity of the statement. Furthermore, it is telling that neither of them spoke of the love that they "saw," as if this would have been a debasement of its idealistic integrity. Yet, perhaps most emblematic of the convoluted narrative layers of the text is the sentence. "I saw it, and she saw I saw it." It is the movement of these glances, reflecting off one another, that suggests the confusion of the

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<sup>62</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.147. Print.

narrative relays that set themselves up in a sort of *mise en abyme* structure, as if to obscure the point of origin.<sup>63</sup>

What we have here – within the text’s interpretive layers – is what Felman refers to as a “reading effect” (or, rather, an accumulation of reading effects) and what has been described by Roland Barthes, perhaps more eloquently in his text, *Critique et Vérité*: “Faire une seconde écriture avec la première écriture de l’oeuvre, c’est en effet ouvrir la voie des relais imprévisibles, leur infini des glaces.”<sup>64</sup> In this case, the point of origin that is being obscured is that of the governess’s love, which seems to be confused and displaced between the narrative elements of the text. Following the above passage, we come to the lines I have already quoted twice, which now take on a slightly altered meaning.

‘Who was it she was in love with?’  
‘The story will tell,’ I took upon myself to reply...  
‘The story *won’t* tell,’ said Douglas; ‘not in any literal or vulgar way.’<sup>65</sup>

Having assumed the third and final link (confined within the text itself), the narrator takes it upon himself to become the interpreter of Douglas’s statement. Yet, as is made clear by Douglas’s enigmatic response, he has committed an error in his assumption of hermeneutical certainty. In truth, we are never told explicitly with whom the governess was in love. There are indications that this love of the governess refers to her affection for Douglas, just as there are equally suggestive signs that she is in love with the master (certainly Wilson infers it). Love, thus, is one such example of an impenetrable premise upon which the ambiguity of the text seems to hinge.

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<sup>63</sup> Felman, Shoshana. *Madness and Writing*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. P.177. Print.

<sup>64</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Critique et Vérité*. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1966. P.6. Print.

(“To do a second writing of the first work has the effect of opening an unforeseeable relay of meaning, an infinite play of mirrors.”)

<sup>65</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.255. Print.

Yet, there is still another level of interpretation—another spectral relay—that we have not yet considered in the text. Just as the narrative sets up a chain of readings, the text is built to anticipate and the gaze of its (exterior) reader. Thus, James’s reader finds himself reenacting the hermeneutical processes that are contained within the text. It is the text’s external relationship to the critic that allows its rhetoric to take an augmented form under the transformative gaze of its reader. This process fertilizes most potently the polysemy of the text with all the rhetorical possibility of its ambiguous language. Set up almost like a Rorschach test, James’s text—in its resistance to being read or reduced, instead effectively analyzes its reader, as if to inverse the accepted paradigm of the reader who comprehends the text. We might even think of James’s image of the figure in the carpet. Anyone who has seen the complex patterns on these Persian rugs knows that there is undoubtedly an abundance of patterns, designs and shapes that might be viewed within its twists and turns. One man may see one image, where another sees an entirely different one. The burden of meaning is therefore pushed onto the reader and the act of teasing a signification out of the decided ambiguity of such a text is to ignore its definitive plurality and irreducibility. Thus, it is this *contre-abime*<sup>66</sup>—the critic, or second writing, set in relation to the *abime* (the text)—that is most relevant to Barthes’s notion of unforeseeable relays and endless reflections of meaning. In this case, it allows for an allegorical reading of *The Turn of the Screw* that would posit a reflection on language—in other words, the text would become a discourse about discourse. Taking this into account, it would seem that my conclusion—that the ambiguity of the text hinges on the

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<sup>66</sup> These terms, used by Derrida simply refer to the two spectral mirrors which together form the construction of a *mise en abyme*. He originally uses the terms to define the relation of Kafka’s *Before the Law* to *The Trial*—the former having been placed within the narrative of the latter, thus, setting up a sort of *mise en abyme* reading effect.



idea of love in the text—begins to appear somewhat shorthanded and far too literal to be of any use to a critic.

To piece together the epistemological meaning that Felman suggests, it would be appropriate to view the notion of love in James's tale as an *allegoreme*<sup>67</sup> that corresponds to a plural, indefinable language—thereby paradoxically both signifying (allegorically) the idea of a polysemy and (literally) enacting its irresolvable ambiguity. Love, in a sense, is an excellent candidate as the literal placeholder for non-literal language due to its largely abstract constitution. It is perhaps the pinnacle of—if not the most highly esteemed—subjective viewpoint, adhering strictly to a singularity of feeling that cannot exist outside its beholder. To reduce love to a literal meaning is to deny its definitive singular essence and to diminish it to a commonality, a banality and a mere linguistic commodity.

Additionally, love is, as Felman notes, an object of transference throughout the tale. She notes that the *love* of the governess and the master that is substituted for the love of Douglas and the governess, which allows for the very transmission of the story (the passing on of the manuscript). She continues to trace this relationship between the unnamed narrator and Douglas, noting a climate of seduction that is involved in the latter's telling of the tale. Thus, love and transmission seem to be dependent factors in the text.

If the text is concerned, then, with aspects of transmission, of reading and comprehension, we must look further into the narrative – the actual account of the governess – to see the way in which these partially allegorical and partially mimetic articulations take form. One insight that Felman makes about this central part of the tale

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<sup>67</sup> De man's term for the allegorical signifier (the literal value of language as opposed to its rhetorical signification [*allegoresis*])

is that it is largely based around letters. She notes that the manuscript containing the account is a missive sent through the mail, and thus itself constitutes a letter.

Additionally, at the beginning of the governess's stay at Bly, she is forwarded a puzzling letter from the master (who has declined to read it himself). This letter explains that Miles has been expelled from school—though it does not tell on what grounds the young boy has been dismissed. Secondly, the governess tells us that she intercepts the children's letters to the master. And finally there is the letter that she intends to write to master (at Mrs. Grose's appeal) to inform him of the strange occurrences at Bly.

If we consider that the manuscript is a letter—one that itself pertains to letters—then we have once more a *mise en abyme* structure, which itself is set up as a *contre-abyme* in relation to the prefaces of the text. It is perhaps this notion that prompts Felman's conclusion that “the story then is nothing but the circulation of a violated letter which materially travels from place to place through the successive changes of its addressees, and through a series of address-corrections.”<sup>68</sup> While this logic certainly applies to the tale's percolation through narrative elements, the same process is repeated in letters that are written at Bly. Consider the letter detailing Miles' expulsion:

The postbag, that evening (...) contained a letter for me, which, however, in the hand of my employer, I found to be composed but of a few words enclosing another, addressed to himself, with a *seal still unbroken*. “This, I recognize, is from the head-master, and the head-master's an awful bore. Read him, please; deal with him; but mind you don't report.”<sup>69</sup>

The letter explaining the boy's misconduct is itself enclosed in another letter as if to place the former *en-abyme*. Furthermore, it is the enigma posed by the letter—the obscurity

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<sup>68</sup> Felman, Shoshana. *Madness and Writing*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. P.211. Print.

<sup>69</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.157. Print.

surrounding the boy's dismissal—that will prompt the governess to continue the chain of letters in the text.

If we read further on into the citation, there appears another interesting hint of James's rhetorically concealed, yet keenly modern perception of language.

*I broke the seal with a great effort—so great a one that it was a long time coming to it; took the unopened missive at last to my room and only attacked it just before going to bed.*<sup>70</sup>

There seems to be both a great difficulty and, indeed, violence inherent in the act of breaking the seal of the letter. The violence of the act seems to be related, in some senses, to the very act of reading. In a sense, to read and to interpret are inseparable from one another as the process of the former involves a reduction of language—otherwise what edification could one derive from it? Thus the reduction and ascription of a literal and fixed value to language bears a certain mark of violence for James, which we will return to in the analysis of the final act of the novel.

Another key insight made by the critic is that all of the letters written within the governess' account, though they are all intercepted or destroyed, share one address. It seems to be no coincidence that they are all addressed to the Master—that they should all strive to convene at such a location, which has already been expressly prohibited. We should recall the condition of the governess employment at Bly:

He told her frankly of this difficulty—that for several applicants the conditions had been prohibitive. (...) It sounded strange, and all the more so because of his main condition.”

“Which was—?”

“That she should never trouble him—never, never; neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything, only meet all questions

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<sup>70</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.157. Print.

herself; receive all moneys from his solicitor, take the whole thing over and let him alone.”<sup>71</sup>

From the beginning, the relationship of the governess and the Master is a contract of strict non-communication and non-union. Thus, the meaning of this “difficulty” that is spoken about may extend beyond the mere circumstance of the governess. It seems to point to the type of literary, or more specifically, *ontological* difficulty that is the linguistic condition of the text; that is, it is decidedly ambiguous, written to withhold a secret and to resist its reader’s comprehension. Like the Master, who has withdrawn from the text and from any communication with the governess, the meaning of the text is placed decidedly out of our reach. Viewed in this way, the figure of the Master is almost exactly like the inaccessible absolute(s) that Kafka’s characters strive after in his novels parables. Just as the *Law* in *The Trial* is to Joseph K. or the emperor is to the messenger of the *Imperial message*, the Master is to the governess; he is representative of an inaccessible authorial certainty that is continually sought after, but ultimately unattainable (“No one could push through here, even with a message from a dead man”). Another indication of this sort of ontological difficulty that should be addressed is the governess’s difficulty in breaking the seal of the letter addressed to the Master. It is fitting that the contents of the letter remain largely ambiguous and obscure to her, as they are not meant for her. Its meaning is reserved for the Master just as the meaning of a text that exhibits *ontological* difficulty is reserved for its author.

Having situated the relationship of the Governess to the Master—the reader and interpreter to the Ultimate and objective signification—it becomes easy to see how a linguistic allegory might take shape in the text. In terms of the apparitions of the text,

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<sup>71</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.151. Print.

Felman makes a compelling argument that they represent the interpretative and polysemic possibilities of a story that can neither be confirmed nor denied. In this sense, they occupy a position that is similar to the unfixable ambiguity of *love* in the prologue. The idea of a ghost—something that is merely a shade of a true or material form—is, indeed, fitting for this purpose.

However, it is the role of the children in such an allegory of transmission that Felman seems to neglect. It would seem (after some textual analysis), that they suggest the innocence of a pure and autonomous language—one that is unaware of itself and of its own signification, having been estranged from its author’s motives. The possibility that they are possessed by the ghosts of Bly manor (as representative of the possible but uncertain significations of language) would seem to confirm this theory. With this in mind, consider this passage, which follows the governess’s resolve to force a confession from Miles concerning the ghosts at Bly:

He had picked up his hat, which he had brought in, and stood twirling it in a way that gave me...a perverse horror of what I was doing. To do it in *any* way was an act of violence, for what did it consist of but the obtrusion of the idea of grossness and guilt on a small helpless creature who had been for me a revelation of the possibilities of beautiful discourse...So we circled about with terrors and scruples, fighters not daring to close.<sup>72</sup>

The “twirling” and “helpless” innocence of the boy certainly purports a pure language, (like that of Mallarmé, for example) that is untouched by the “violence” of rigid semantic confinement. To force a confession from the boy is thus to literalize the language he represents and to deny it the “possibilities of beautiful discourse”—a phrase that seems to point the polysemy that is inherent in James’ ambiguous language. The impasse at which the Miles and the governess are left is described poetically as “fighters not daring to

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<sup>72</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.255. Print.

close.” This is indeed the impasse that James’ reader perceives in the multiple and dynamic meanings of the text—notably, the love of the governess and the apparitions of Quint and Jessel—which constantly defer to one another. Indeed, by virtue of his or her attempt at interpretation and the paralysis that is engendered by the text’s ambiguity, the reader too finds himself in this circuitous loop—a “fighter” himself in the ring, unable to say with any certainty what *The Turn of The Screw* is really about. We can only perhaps say that it demonstrates this linguistic conundrum that is both the text’s meaning and the negation of its meaning.

In order to tie this allegory of linguistic uncertainty together, we must look to the ending of the tale, which seems to confirm the story as a struggle of language to remain free, fluid and plural in the face of the interpretative necessity of objective signification. As a preface to this ending, it might be helpful to look back to the most recent quotation that I have used from the text—however, this time including the ellipsed content.

I suppose I now read into our situation a clearness it couldn’t have had at the time, for I seem to see our poor eyes already lighted with some spark of a prevision of the anguish that was to come. So we circled about with terrors and scruples, fighters not daring to close.<sup>73</sup>

In her *futur antérieur* construction, the governess alludes clearly to the ending of the tale, in which Miles is smothered to death. The fact that this warning comes just before her attempted forced confession, which fails in her acknowledgment of “the possibilities of a beautiful discourse,” seems to tell us that the end of the tale itself is commenting on this linguistic dialectic of fixed, objective and fluid, plural language. The clarity that she now perceives, though only in retrospect, seems to indicate an understanding of the violence

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<sup>73</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.255. Print.

that is linked with this act of forced confession and, indeed, with the reduction of language to a mere literal status.

Let us look to the scene of the boy's death itself. The passage occurs when the apparition of Peter Quint emerges outside a nearby window and the governess determines to wrest a confession from the boy.

“...[governess speaking] It's *there*—the coward horror, there for the last time!”

At this, after a second in which his head made the movement of a baffled dog's on a scent and then gave a frantic little shake for air and light, he was at me in a white rage, bewildered, glaring vainly over the place and missing wholly, though it now, to my sense, filled the room like the taste of posion, the wide overwhelming presence.

‘It's *he*?’

I was so determined to have all my proof that I flashed into ice<sup>74</sup> to challenged him. ‘Whom do you mean by “he”?’

‘Peter Quint—you devil!’ His face gave again, round the room, its convulsed supplication. ‘Where?’

They are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion.<sup>75</sup>

In equating the boy's questions (“It's he?” and “where”) with a confession—with the literal status of the name, Peter Quint—the governess seems to fall victim to the hermeneutical trap of the text. Like Wilson, who finds certainty in the decided ambiguity of the governess's love, the governess has found certainty in the ambiguity of the boy's interrogatives. Though she seems to be declaring her victory, and the exorcism of the ghosts, we will see that her interpretative mistake—the equating of the literal and the ambiguously plural—will prove fatal.

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<sup>74</sup> It is in offering the literal, proper name that the governess flashes into ice. Ice, thus, is equated with the literal and objective status of meaning. We have seen this motif before in the prologue. The telling of the story necessitates breaking “the thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter.” The connotation, thus, is that the very act of transmitting the story involves the destruction of its literal or objective meaning. This trope (generally of ice or snow as opposed to the fluidity of water) is not limited to James—we have seen it equally in Kafka's *The Trees* (“like trunks in the snow”)

<sup>75</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.261. Print.

I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed had stopped.<sup>76</sup>

If the death of the boy is synonymous with the smothering of language (“the possibilities of beautiful discourse”) by virtue of its *literalization* and unwarranted reduction, then what is it, specifically, that makes this process “vulgar” in James’ eyes. Early on in her article Felman sums up this relation neatly, delineating with precision the linguistic—and indeed aesthetic dilemma of literal, objective language:

The literal is vulgar because it *stops* the movement constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution. The vulgar, therefore is anything that misses, or falls short of, the dimension, anything that rules out, or excludes, meaning as a loss and as flight—anything that strives, or in other words, to eliminate from language its inherent silence, anything that misses the specific way in which a text *actively* won’t tell.<sup>77</sup>

The importance of polysemy, of fluidity and ambiguity in language, seems to be necessary for the preservation of its rhetorical possibilities, which might resist the stagnation and the commodification of language as a mere linguistic currency. For James it seems that the effect of this type of *ontological* difficulty was that it lent his tale the lurid and uncanny uncertainty for which he strived—that which was necessary to imbue the suspense and horror of his ghost story. Yet, there is certainly something to be said about the aesthetic of this sort of language that resists the reader’s comprehension. If it were in fact devoid of value, why would poets such Mallarmé or Celan have written at all? Furthermore, does the notion of *ontological* difficulty bear a mimetic appeal in the representation of the depths of consciousness and the idea of *exformation*—that

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<sup>76</sup> James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. P.262. Print.

<sup>77</sup> Felman, Shoshana. *Madness and Writing*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. P.153 Print.



information, which comprises an idea, though remains incommunicable via language? These are all questions to consider in considering the limits of semiotic language and their exploration in the modern narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (we must expand out timetable to include James' works here). Yet, what seems certain, at least likely, is that James' *Turn of the Screw* is more than simply a thrilling ghost story; it is a commentary on the very linguistic means which he used to elaborate his meaning, and at that, a masterful prefiguring of the modern literature and the skepticism concerning language and interpretation that would emerge early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Overturing Literary Precedent:

### The Verdict

As a brief Segue into Modern literature, it might be said that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century gave rise to a literature that attempted the faithful representation of reality, simply as it is—unobstructed by the subjective lens of an individual's observation. Realist writers such as Gustave Flaubert or Emile Zola have taken this tactic to great extents in their drawn out descriptions of flora, fauna, man and society, going so far as to devote nearly half a page to the description of an empty field or the incongruous elements of a schoolboy's cap. As another general example, take Balzac's introduction to *Eugénie Grandet*:

In some country towns there are houses more depressing to the sight than the dimmest cloister, the most melancholy ruins, or the dreariest stretch of sandy waste. Perhaps such houses as these combine the characteristics of all the three, and to the dumb silence of the monastery they unite the gauntness and the grimness of the ruin, and the arid desolation of the waste. So little sign is there of life or of movement about them, that a

stranger might take them for uninhabited dwellings; but the sound of an unfamiliar footstep brings someone to the window, a passive face suddenly appears above the sill, and the traveler receives a listless and indifferent glance—it is almost as if a monk leaned out to look for a moment on the world.<sup>78</sup>

The objectivity of this ontological realm is derived, in part, by its static elements, its emptiness and “arid desolation”; it appears as a scene frozen in time. In this incipit to Balzac’s text there appears to be a rudimentary allegory of reading that is similar in some respects to those we have examined in the previous chapters. The seemingly empty “dwellings” of the text could be read as agents in a metaphor for the impartial and detached language that is bereft of (“uninhabited” by) subjective or authorial sentiment (“so little sign is there of life or of movement about them”). The reader’s entrance into this barren world is marked by the “traveler”—a stranger to this desolate land. His relation to the text is one of inaction as hinted at by “the listless and indifference glance” he receives from the only exterior sign of life, “a passive face.” It is within this relation between the reader and this text that a “dumb silence” governs.

If the literary agenda of authors such as Balzac and Flaubert was to capture and arrest the superficial surfaces of an external world and to petrify language to this end, it could be argued that modernism veered in the opposite direction. The subject of authors like Proust, Kafka and James constitutes, generally, a turning inward and an attempt to depict “not an echo from without, but the resonance of a vibration from within.”<sup>79</sup> It is by virtue of this subject—the inner world of consciousness and the movement of its vibrations—that an instability of perception is engendered in works by Proust, Kafka and

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<sup>78</sup> de Balzac, Honore. *Eugenie Grandet*. N.p.: Penguin Books, 1955. P.1. Print.

<sup>79</sup> Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time Volume I*. New York: Random House, 2003 (p.119)

James. This is, effectively, the mobility entailed by Proust's revelation, quoted before, that "the immobility of things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception of them."<sup>80</sup>

The transference of this movement into linguistic realms seems to be linked to the notion of *ontological* difficulty, as expressed by Steiner. The symptom—the text's irreducibility by virtue of its inherent multiplicity of meaning—might then be linked with the "ancient trope of inadequate discourse," which I have previously cited. That is (to recount), the inability of language to arrest the impermeable singularity and the fluid movement of consciousness and perception. It would be appropriate then to equate this seemingly inevitable difficulty (as it pertains to the Modern's subject) with Walter Benjamin's pessimistic conclusion on Kafka. In a longer estimation of the Czech author's work, the critic writes,

This document [the letter to Brod, in which insists that his writings be burned], which no one interested in Kafka can disregard, says that the writings did not satisfy their author, that he regarded his efforts as failures, that he counted himself among those who were bound to fail. He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into doctrine, to turn it into a parable and restore it to that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him to be the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image" so faithfully.<sup>81</sup>

In this view, it is Kafka's sensibility to the incompatibility of language and experience—the idolatry inherent in representation—that dooms his struggle to failure. Thus, Benjamin's conclusion reduces Kafka's work to a striving towards an inaccessible

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<sup>80</sup> Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time Volume I*. New York: Random House, 2003 (p.5)

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Random House Inc, 1968. P.129. Print.

absolute and a summation of the very linguistic predicament that precludes any possibility of the text's truth or success. Such a failure, beautiful as it may be, is entailed by the author's inability to raise language to the level of truth or, in other words, the inability of literature to be synonymous with the meaning it seeks.

However, there is perhaps another more redeeming effect, engendered by *ontological* difficulty, which Benjamin has ignored. Consider the following quotation from Michel de Certeau's *L'Écriture de l'Histoire*, and the significant implications that might be drawn from it.

Writing is born from and deals with acknowledged doubt of an explicit division, in sum, of the impossibility of one's own place. It articulates an act that is constantly a beginning: the subject is never authorized by a place, it could never install itself in an inalterable cogito, it remains a stranger to itself and forever deprived of an ontological ground, and therefore it always comes up short or is in excess, always the debtor of a death, indebted with respect to the disappearance of a genealogical and territorial "substance," linked to a name that cannot be owned.<sup>82</sup>

Though there is perhaps a pessimistic tone to the passage, it also entails an emancipation of meaning from its linguistic bonds. Benjamin's mistake might then be that he attempts to "own" the language and the meaning of Kafka's work. In proclaiming the author's failure he latches onto the way that meanings "comes up short," though ignores the way in which, its uncertain "ontological ground" breeds its "excess"—the way in which a plurality of meaning can be unlocked from language's "reserves of silence", from an author's aversion to literal signification and from the way in which "the text actively won't tell."<sup>83</sup> This shortsightedness of his parochial approach to meaning is exactly the logical failing of Joseph K. in *The Trial*, or the unnamed narrator of *The Turn of the*

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<sup>82</sup> de Certeau, Michel. *Écriture de l'Histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975. P.327 Print.

<sup>83</sup> Felman, Shoshana. *Madness and Writing*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994. P.153. Print. (both quotations in this sentence are attributed to Felman's text)

*Screw*, and of the countless critics who have proffered an objectively assured reading of either of these texts.

As the priest in the cathedral suggests that it is a modification of perspective that can allow Joseph K. to understand his legal predicament, it is the same with Kafka's reader. If we apply this discursive interpretative philosophy of Kafka's priest—one that allows for the cohabitation of multiple meanings within Kafka's parables, instead of the obliteration of one before the other—Kafka's texts might just be emancipated from what, at one point, seemed to be their inevitable failure. Yet, this shift in perspective is merely what allows the true genius of Kafka's work to be recognized. The true redeeming aspect of ambiguity and the polysemy of interpretation it engenders, instead, has to do with its construction. Gilles Deleuze compares Kafka's peculiar modern style to a machine, geared to create an effect.<sup>84</sup> This effect, not remarkable in itself, is the constitutive capacity of the author's text to generate connections—it is a catalyst for the building of associations, and for a whole myriad range of interpretative possibilities that spring up in the reader's mind.<sup>85</sup>

What is truly remarkable is that this generative and associative effect seems to be linked to a subject that is indeed intrinsic to modernist literature—the fluidity and constant movement of consciousness and perception that in Proust we have deemed temporal layers. Though, in this case, given that Kafka has little mention of temporality in his works (with the exception of *Before The Law*), we might instead refer to this

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<sup>84</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986. Print

<sup>85</sup> This is perhaps what prompts Kafka to write in a letter to a friend, Oscar Pollak, that “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” This is a favorite quote of Kafka critics, but few seem to suggest the way in which reflects the capacity of his own work to galvanize and set in motion the associative capacity of his readers.

phenomenon as perspectival layers. It is in the fluid and discursive polysemic interpretations engendered by Kafka's ambiguity that one would perceive this flux of consciousness and malleability of perception that is a key revelation in Proust's understanding of the self and its relation to the world.

We should note that, while Proust illustrates this process in the mutability of his subjects, Kafka has a far more ambitious task in mind. His texts (when paired with a reader) literally enact this process in their generation of fluid interpretative possibilities. Kafka's texts, thus, function as a sort of generative mirror for Proustian consciousness in the way that they allow, and truly, encourage associations to latch onto them—to build themselves into the text's meaning in the same way that Proustian consciousness laces itself into the objects it perceives. Better yet (and in keeping with Proust's metaphor of iridescent light and the color spectrum) we should liken Kafka's *machinic* effect to that of a prism—one that filters the readers gaze and his consciousness, refracting it in multiple directions. It is this catalytic capacity inherent in polysemy and its mimetic appeal to conscious perception that appears to be the source of language's power and of its “possibilities of beautiful discourse” for modernists such as Kafka, James or Proust.

Therefore, the reason then why Kafka may have seen himself as a failure—why he would have insisted that his work be burned upon his death—may have to do with something else entirely. Consider these two separate quotes from John Updike's foreword to *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*:

The century since Franz Kafka was born has been marked by the idea of “modernism”—a self consciousness new among centuries, a consciousness of being new.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Updike, John. Foreword. *Kafka: The Complete Works*. Ed. Franz Kafka. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.IX. Print.

Kafka felt bashed before the fact of his own existence, “amateurish” in that this had never been quite expressed before. So singular, he spoke for millions in their new unease...he seems the last holy writer, and the supreme fabulist of modern man’s cosmic predicament.<sup>87</sup>

Updike gets it only half right. It seems undeniable that Kafka’s angst about failure is related to the singularity and newness of his expression (“that this had never been quite expressed before”). Yet, the truly novel aspect of his expression is not what Updike eloquently deems as “modern man’s cosmic predicament.” Instead, it would seem that it is something more like the modern author’s expressive predicament. Kafka was aware that the literature he was writing was unlike anything that had been produced before (with the partial exception of Henry James). His qualms about failure, and about his critics and readers inability to grasp the meaning of his work are related to the fact that his mode of expression—his polysemically fueled associative machine— was a supremely novel and thus “*amateuristic*” expressive mode. It is this that prompts Deleuze’s conclusion that Kafka’s works could not be considered literature in the (then) contemporary sense; they required an entirely new set of interpretative guidelines—guidelines that roughly fit the discursive hermeneutical and perspectival approach of the priest—in order to wrest the true potential of their unique expression.

The tentative tone that Kafka takes in his own work—and in his writings about his work—suggests that he understood that he was, in a sense, overturning the parochial paradigm of interpretation that standard literature necessitated. He had likely been well informed of Nietzsche’s philosophy that

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<sup>87</sup> Updike, John. Foreword. *Kafka: The Complete Works*. Ed. Franz Kafka. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971. P.XVI. Print.

Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings. When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things. To take over, to anticipate, the material.<sup>88</sup>

It is in his text, *The Penal Colony*, that Kafka seems to suggest the necessity to shatter traditional forms of expression, in order to express the modern content of his works.<sup>89</sup>

This story has been interpreted in a myriad of ways and exemplifies the way in which Kafka's associative effect functions. Many have noted that it suggests a religious allegory concerning the overturning of the unsympathetic law of the Old Testament. Equally, critics have noted that it can be read as an allegory of the Dreyfus case, which received immense amounts of attention around the time of Kafka's authorship. Yet, another reading of the text would suggest the way in which Kafka saw himself as overturning literary precedent. If the Old commandant and his elaborate torture machine, "the harrow", represented a pre-modern literary tradition, then the new commandant may be seen as the harbinger of modern expression. The impartial explorer, who is given the responsibility of judging the efficacy of this punitive process, could be seen as Kafka's reader, with whom the final judgment lies.

We observe that "the harrow" is in poor shape; it is breaking down and needs replacement parts, as if to suggest the increasing inadequacy of this system. Additionally, we note that guilt is assumed in each case, as if to suggest the way in which pre-modern literature assumes hermeneutical interpretation as a valid means of deconstructing a text. Finally, one should also note that the punishment, meted out by the harrow, involves the literal ascription of a crime—of which one is assumed but never proven guilty—onto the

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<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. P.28. Print.

<sup>89</sup> Perhaps under this circumstance (drawing on Nietzsche's authority and following Kafka's example) you may forgive my breaking of the traditional essay form (in introducing new content in my conclusion).



flesh of prisoners. This would seem to be the failure of the realists in assuming the an ontological link between language and that which it describes as well as the failure of traditional literary theory, which would suggest that the literature—as literature—must be susceptible to interpretative certainty. The breaking down of the harrow at the end of the story the narrates the way in which Kafka has broken this traditional form and the way in which his typically modern expressive mode both confounds and overturns literary precedent.

The beauty and the genius of Kafka's hybrid form, however, is that it weaves into itself the epistemological dialogue by which its this mode of expression comes to exist. We have seen in the dialectical movement of *The Trees*, in the polysemy suggested by the double meaning of *erträumen*, and in the reversal of the text/reader relationship that is entailed *Before The Law*, that the associations built into his text are not merely haphazard; They often narrate the process, in which this polysemical signification occurs, and in the case of *The Penal Colony* (and even of *Before The Law*), they narrate the way in which this modern expression confounds traditional hermeneutical processes and, thus, the way in which a new form of literature emerges.

It is by this token that Kafka's texts are not just an allegorical expression of its novel significative capacity, but are also, themselves, the expression. In other words, (returning to the culminating question at which we have left the first chapter) Kafka has managed the raise the polysemy of the text to the lofty and paradoxical height of an objective signification—he has created an exquisite purity in a literature (a signifier) that signifies itself. It is in this sense that the author achieves the seemingly impossible and truly remarkable goal of raising the representation to the level of the represented—

flattening the distance between the two and making one synonymous and indistinguishable from the other. The verdict is in and Kafka may rest assuredly. The same, however, should not be said of his plaintiff, Walter Benjamin.

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