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Kafka Beyond Signification: Testimony, Community, and Truth

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Kafka Beyond Signification:
Testimony, Community, and Truth

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

To my family.

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Introduction

My engagement with Franz Kafka questions the role of communicability in his work in light of his self-proclaimed doom to be misunderstood and unread. As a widely translated and published author, how can his relationship to the German language be disseminated in literature while preserving his “purity” uncannily tied to absence and failure? In this chapter, I consider how the traveling of words, whether in translation, writing letters, or publishing stories, attests to crises of communicability and places the functionality of communal language on trial.

Considering Kafka’s reflections on communicability in tandem with Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Walter Benjamin, these use of language in these works communicate ideas of non-belonging by attesting to the drifts between community and belief.

Kafka is epiphytically called one of the greatest writers who “speaks the purest german prose of the century,”¹ along with “a writer of absence,”² with the “purity and beauty of a failure.”³ In conversation, these claims raise more questions than answers. They contradict and confuse one another, simultaneously emphasizing and reducing their descriptions of Kafka to gestures of what refuses transmission in his work. Instead of making merely informative claims, these statements demonstrate the latency of Kafka's thought that resists explanation. By alluding

¹ Judith Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?,” *London Review of Books* 33, no. 5 (March 3, 2011), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n05/judith-butler/who-owns-kafka>. 6.

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric*. (Polity Press, 2011), 119.

³ Walter Benjamin, “Some Reflections on Franz Kafka,” in *Illuminations*. (Random House Inc., 2014), 143.

to what Kafka cannot be reduced to and preserving the specificity of his significance---these antinomies designate a purity to the lack of communicability in Kafka's collected works.

Exploring Kafka's employment of the German language as a language bereft of sociality, my first chapter will offer literature as a form of testimony capable of questioning the communicability of language. In the second chapter, I consider the role of *truth* and *belief* in literature; exploring the absence of truth in *the Trial* and K.'s inability to remember the origins of his crime, I question how literature explores the ways truth is signified by testifying to its elusive status. In my final chapter, I examine how literature testifies to the instability of identity and subjectivity. Examining literature's ability to deconstruct distinctions between subject and object, I explore Julia Kristeva's theories of literary abjection and revolutionary poetic language in conversation with Kafka's short stories "A Hunger Artist" and "A Report to An Academy." Both tales destabilize the role of community in relation to the narrator's identity, testifying to the precarity of social belonging.

Chapter 1:

Kafka's Community: Language and Non-Belonging

Franz Kafka was born in Prague to a middle-class Jewish family. He grew up speaking both Czech and German, although German was the language of social mobility that his parents would have assimilated towards. Despite speaking Czech his whole life, Kafka never felt fluent in the language. His socialization as a German-speaking Jew displaced him from both German and Czech communities. Both groups carried prejudice towards Jewish people, and the Czech community resented those who spoke the language of their German conquerors.⁴ Although he could *speak* both languages, neither presented themselves in his writing as languages that could designate the brevity of his experiences; this is apparent in his diary, where he wrote with an air of humor: “my people, provided I have one.”⁵ Despite his incoherent ties to these communities, his father sent him to German schools, where he became inspired by its national literature. This inspiration was troubled by his inability to feel at *home* in the language--a drift between the language and Kafka's faith in its communicability. Butler notes that in his letters, Kafka's lover Felice Bauer “is constantly correcting his German, suggesting that he is not fully at home in this second language.” He faces the same difficulties with Czech; in his letters to his translator and lover, Milena Jesenká, she “is constantly teaching him Czech phrases he neither knows how to

⁴ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Franz Kafka." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 29, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Franz-Kafka>.

⁵ Judith Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?”, 6.

spell nor to pronounce, suggesting that Czech, too, is also something of a second language.”⁶

Could Kafka not have a first language? Did his speech not gain fluency because of his minority status? The uncertainty of defining a “first language” or what it means to feel comfortable in a language can’t be resolved.

Kafka’s work unravels truth by highlighting the shortcomings of language as an emanation of being and mode of belonging. With this in mind, his works grapple with the difficulties of relaying one’s inner world in the confines of a language that has been expropriated to exclude his multiple belongings to Czech and Jewish networks. In view of language being irreducible to an ideal community, intention and communicability become thwarted concepts. I consider how the translation and scholarship of Kafka’s work problematize and disarticulate the “purity” of his German---whilst simultaneously canonizing him as a “German author.” How does Kafka’s writing testify to his exilic belonging with regards to language, unraveling its relation to national identity, and the communicability of truth? In this chapter, I will consider the implications of speaking *one* language as *one’s own*; question how community, identity, and belonging find new meanings in Kafka’s work and explore the modes in which literature offers a distance from the oppressiveness of language.

I. Kafka’s Community

⁶ Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?”, 5.

In her essay “Who Owns Kafka?” Judith Butler reflects on the contradictions of designating Kafka to a community in relation to his Jewish heritage, Czech citizenship, or German writing. The essay, written in 2011, responds to the ongoing Trial in Tel Aviv regarding the stewardship of Kafka’s manuscripts of published and unpublished works. Before his death, Kafka gave all his manuscripts to his friend Max Brod, leaving him a letter which stated his last request: “Everything I leave behind me . . . in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others’), sketches and so on, to be burned unread.”⁷ Butler offers a history of the trajectory of his request, noting:

Kafka had apparently already burned much of the work himself. Brod refused to honour the request, although he did not publish everything that was bequeathed to him . . . but then put most of the rest away in suitcases, perhaps honouring Kafka’s wish to not have it published, but surely refusing the wish to have it destroyed. Brod’s compromise with himself turned out to be consequential, and in some ways we are now living out the consequences of the non-resolution of Kafka’s bequest.⁸

This moment of living through the consequential non-resolution of Kafka-- the publishing, burning, and storing away of the texts-- makes his work impossibly inconclusive. Given that Kafka never completed a full novel and burned 90 percent of his work, Butler is correct to offer no resolution to the contradictions that surround Kafka’s legacy. In her, essay, “Values of Difficulty,” she considers the notion of communicability as a test of language:

To say that the communication of truth depends on its presentation is to say that such communication is rhetorical. This means that the presentation of truth that is made may well produce meanings that call into question the truth that is communicated or add something more, something different, to what is explicitly intended. The language in which one offers one’s views does not always carry the meanings that one intends, and our words often return to us as hauntings from another order. For words are not first spoken and then received, they are received and spoken, received and imparted at once in the act of speaking. That I am born into a language does not mean that it speaks me as if I

⁷ Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?”, 11.

⁸ Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?”, 1.

am it's ventriloquization, but it does speak as I speak, and my voice is never fully or exclusively my own.”⁹

Butler argues that we are co-authored by language in unrecognizable ways. Although we can communicate our truths with an intended meaning in mind, the language in which we speak maintains authority that separates the speaker and receiver. With this in mind, Butler’s description of Brod and Kafka’s communication and usage of ambiguous phrases such as “perhaps honoring...but surely refusing the wish,” “compromise with himself,” and “consequences of non-resolution” draw one to question if literary texts are able to find resolve. She notes that when a thought becomes speech “the act of speaking” at once receives and imparts words, simultaneously establishing authority for this “truth” and making it known. Butler’s statement is complicated by the problem posed: what can we derive as the intent of a statement that undoes the authority of intent? The statement calls for its undoing and is also unbreachable because of the ambiguous phrase “ghosts of another order.” These struggles with ghosts of another order, appear in the text as battles between intentionality and its afterlife. This is the common predicament of expressing and understanding the singularity of experience, a type of unverifiable truth claimed in language. Butler’s notion of intention is all the more complicated for Kafka’s estate of writings. His literary fame and canonization carry denotations of completeness in their published form and criticism that does not reconcile with the history he imagined for these artifacts.

After Brod’s death, Kafka’s work was left to Esther Hoffe, who sold the manuscript of *the Trial*, for 2.1 million dollars and left the rest of the manuscripts to her daughters.¹⁰ Her

⁹Judith Butler and Jonathan Culler, “Values of Difficulty,” in *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, 2022, 199–215, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503624009>, 199.

¹⁰ Butler, “Who Owns Kafka?”, 1.

children attempted to capitalize upon their inheritance of the text by auctioning off portions of the manuscripts by weight. In doing so, the National Library of Israel made their legal claim for the works to *belong* to Israel, thus insinuating Kafka's art and identity were specifically Jewish, or at least more so than Czech or German. The implications of this claim are complicated by Kafka's ambivalence towards the Jewish people, along with his diasporic view of Palestine as a destination. Furthermore, Kafka died in 1924 and did not live to see the atrocities of World War II or the establishment of Israel in 1948. His executor and good friend, Max Brod, was a Zionist and settled in Israel; in sort fabricating a claim to belonging far too simplistic for the contradictory notions of belonging Kafka held. If one could say Kafka belonged to any group or place, it would be literature. After all, he once wrote: "All I am is literature, and I am not able or willing to be anything else."¹¹

In Kafka's letters and diaries, he describes the faulted communicability of his language as a problem of truth that is demanded and unresolvable through writing. The limitations of communicability in German restrict the possibility of expressing despair created by the oppressiveness of language. However, these limits find a path of resistance in literature. The constraints of writing in German as a Jew are expressed in one of his diary entries, where he reflects on the word *Mutter*: "Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it... we give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much more heavily."¹² In this instance, Kafka attributes his inability to express

¹¹ Franz Kafka quoted in Maurice Blanchot, "Kafka and Literature," in *The Work of Fire*, Impr, nrf (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

¹² Franz Kafka and Max Brod, *The Diaries, 1910-1923* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 153.

emotions of love to a barrier beyond his control. The contradictory emotions latent in speaking the German word ‘Mutter,’ designate a linguistic drift that complicates the meaning of the word and how it is meant; similar to Butler’s earlier claim that language is not exclusively one’s own. These limitations Kafka found in the German language charge his writing, giving movement to the text that pushes upon the limits of communicability. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka reflects on the despair of Jews writing in German, calling them beasts trapped in a cage:

First of all, the product of their despair could not be German literature, though outwardly it seemed to be so. They existed among three impossibilities, which I just happen to call linguistic impossibilities. It is simplest to call them that. But they might also be called something entirely different. These are: The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might also add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of writing (since the despair could not be mitigated through writing, was enemy life *and* writing; writing here was only a moratorium, as it is for someone who writes his last will and testament just before he hangs himself—an expedient that may well last a whole life).¹³

Kafka notes that the problem of writing is a feeling of sorrow in relation to language rather than literature. His writing on these impossibilities bears the question of how one can speak of the impossibility of speaking? He begins by describing this problem as “linguistic,” given the simplicity of the term---only to express the complication of expression through the term “writing.” Rather than finding despair in German literature, the object of despair for Jewish writers comes from the distance they find in their own writing. As an affliction that cannot be mitigated, writing is tied to the experience of creating art as an outsider within the language one speaks in. Writing in German, writing difficulty, and *not* writing, are impossibilities of speaking for and within a language. He notes that the impossibility of not writing leads to writing as the only possibility, which is a task that must be attempted because of our faith in writing. The last

¹³ Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston, Third paperback edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2016), 593-4.

impossibility creates a linguistic blockade that dissipates the first 3, concluding the despair could not be assuaged by writing. In calling writing an expedient, he emphasizes it as a betrayal of truth that lasts an entire life, whilst creating a “testament.” The impossibility of writing certainly did not stop Kafka from writing or identifying with literature. Looking to Kafka’s parables, his language and communication in literature challenge the impossibility of writing by writing elusively.

Writing “Non-arrival,” in Literature and Letters.

I would like to consider Jacques Derrida’s negotiation of the singular and general in his interview “This Strange Institution Called Literature.” He explores the contradictory ways in which expression is simultaneously limited and expansive:

What is tragically and happily universal is absolute singularity, How could one speak or write otherwise? What would one have to say otherwise? And all to say nothing, in fact? Nothing which absolutely touches on absolute singularity without straight away missing it, while also never missing it?.....This tragedy, I mean this destiny without a strictly assignable destination, is also a tragedy of competence, relevance, truth, etc. There are many, but there has to be this play of iterability in the singularity of the idiom. And this play threatens what makes it possible. The threat cannot be separated from the chance, or the condition of possibility from what limits possibility. There is no pure singularity which affirms itself as such without instantly dividing itself, and so exiling itself.¹⁴

Here we have an iteration of Derrida’s paradoxical law of writing. The vicissitudes between the possibility of singularity and its limitation are unavoidable. In a fascinating way, Derrida is describing the life and after-life of the idiom, which is intrinsically tied to what the speaking—in the most immediate, alive sense—subject testifies to in speech. Iterability becomes this act of speaking of the singularity, which lends itself to becoming a part of language. The tragedy he

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature,” in *Acts of Literature*, (Routledge, 1992) 65.

writes of is a destiny to never quite know where our words end up. In this sense, what we call communicable/incommunicable or translatable/untranslatable sacrifices an inexpressible truth whilst preserving difference. Purity is described as a possibility of absolute singularity that is unattainable, yet reckoned with in literature. In light of Kafka's thoughts on the impossibility of writing in German, purity of language appears as a problem of communication. Derrida lays out writing as a purely singular act that, through becoming public and universal, makes a claim and sacrifice in order to be believed. What Derrida calls a "destiny without a strictly assignable destination," is relative to the act of writing which establishes a mode of communication towards understanding.

I would like to consider how this dynamic is at play within Kafka's parables, which emphasize what Derrida calls the law of literature to "say anything and everything,"¹⁵ along with considering his usage of German idioms, which encapsulate the impossibility of singularity. The problem of singularity and the after-life of literature is at play in multifarious forms in Kafka's parables. The translation I offer is from Judith Butler's essay, *Who Owns Kafka?*, which brilliantly iterates the singularity of Kafka's idioms as another idiom: "non-arrival," which Butler defines as "the linguistic predicament of writing in a multilingual context, exploiting the syntactical rules of formal German to produce an uncanny effect, but also writing in a contemporary Babel where the misfires of language come to characterize the everyday situation of speech, whether amorous or political."¹⁶ Butler's description of Kafka's poetics considers the sacrifices of communicating a lack of belonging, which is entirely singular, through a work

¹⁵ Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 36.

¹⁶ Butler, "Who Owns Kafka?", 13.

which exiles itself in order to become literature. This uncanny effect of Kafka's German is at play within the communicability of language in the parable, *My Destination*.

I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stable. The servant did not understand me. So I went to the stables myself, saddled my horse, and mounted. In the distance I heard the bugle call, I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me, asking "Where are you riding to, master?" "I don't know," I said only "away from here [weg von hier], away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination." "So you know your goal?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, "didn't I say so? Away-from-here [Weg-von-hier], that's my destination." "You have no provision with you." "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 me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey"¹⁷

My Destination is one of Kafka's works that are published as his "parables". It is not clear whether Kafka defined these written works as parables or if they were designated as such during the later commodifications of his works. The parable as a literary and rhetorical device is defined by its didactic qualities insofar as it relays through the diegesis a moral or spiritual lesson. However, upon first reading, the parable is not governed by any of the literary laws that would designate its naming. Any informative knowledge in Kafka's parable is inaccessible, a Babel-like confusion of tongues that predates the existence of parables attesting to truth in the Biblical text.

In this story, Kafka's rider calls for his horse in order to begin a journey. Upon reading, the act of calling for and traveling are entirely incompatible to each speaker. The narrator hears the call to the journey, the call of trumpets, and hears when his calls to his servant are not heard at all. The speaker and his listener share a dialogue written in German, yet plays on the singularity of each person's speech giving each of them a foreign voice that the other can not hear. The parable without a derived, relevant, or truthful principle doubles the misfires of language in the tale. Even the title, which lays claim to a destination, is axiomatically a place that

¹⁷ Butler, "Who Owns Kafka?", 13-15.

is not. As a literary text, *My Destination* emphasizes the status of literature as explicating testimonial knowledge; self-evidence to the extremity of becoming abject, the drift between testimony and the clarity of its knowledge operates continuously. The title, *Der Aufbruch* translates to the departure, yet its translation to *My Destination* becomes clearer when looking at the original text. The word *Aufbruch* is not used in the parable. Instead, the servant and master say *das Ziel*, which is one of the few examples of a word that English has more words for than German. *Das Ziel*, in English, can be aim, goal, or target.¹⁸ It can also be translated to “destination” or “objective,” which emphasizes the temporal aspect of the word at play in the text.

The lack of clarity given to a future destination is problematized in Kafka’s short story. He intentionally creates a proper noun for a place that is not a place. The word “weg-von-hier,” appears three times in the story. In the first two instances, the word does not appear as a hyphenated place noun. First, it is “away from here,” and “always away from here”. After the second time, the servant has to ask “so you know your destination?” which calls for a change in the word's appearance but does not clarify or change its meaning. “Weg von hier,” and “Weg-von-hier,” both are void of meaning when we consider them literally. However, within the text it operates as a part of the speakers’ *secret* knowledge of what the reader and servant are ignorant to. It is a linguistic blockade that the literary element of the story pushes upon its reader, which calls to deconstruct the notion of communicability in language. The sentence “the journey is so long I must die of hunger if I don’t get anything on the way,” does not make sense, but is spoken as though the conditions of the statement are communicable. The opacity of his logic is

¹⁸ Cambridge German-English Dictionary Online, s.v. “Ziel,” accessed April 12, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/ziel?q=Ziel>

asserted in the parable as unquestionable truth; just as there is no supplemental explanation in the text, there are no supplements for the rider on his journey--a destination that can only be reached through his exhaustion and destruction. For the reader, the parable suspends the truth but offers endless gestures towards its possible arrival. In part

I would like to compare this story with Derrida's notion of the future "to come", which he writes as *l'avenir*. The film, *Derrida*, opens with him discussing what is at stake within the term. Derrida notes that *l'avenir* "refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected".

He continues:

For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's *l'avenir* in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.¹⁹

This notion of futurity is similarly at play in Kafka's parable. The real future, for Derrida, is the one that is completely unexpected and unknown. He calls it the real future despite its claim for realness being contingent on its suspension as unimaginable. With this in mind, "My Destination" alludes to the impossibility of pure communication in language, calling to mind absent referents that cannot assimilate to the text's divided universality.

Untranslatables: Reimagining the Singularity of the Text

In Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," he situates translation as a practice between poetry and philosophy, wherein the translator attempts to reconcile with the alterity of language. Benjamin was an astute reader and collector of books, and in his lifetime he

¹⁹ *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, (New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 2002.)

actively sought out Kafka's texts, which, after his death and before his eventual fame, were sparsely distributed. His reflections highlight the constraints of writing in fragmentary languages--alluding to the multiplicities of languages--which are bereft of a pure language of truth. Through this formulation, Benjamin concludes that "If there is such thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is--the true language."²⁰ Although he offers "true language," to be the singular mode of communication capable of articulating truth, it is clear that Benjamin only utilizes this as an example of its unattainability. Through the conditional statement, "If there is such a thing," he emphasizes that current language will never communicate the secrets "for which all thought strives." For these reasons, poetic speech and its translatability is marked by the ways in which language and its ways of meaning are pushed to their limits within the text.

Benjamin begins his engagement with translation by highlighting what is inessential to writing as artistic expression. He notes that art, although valued by its appreciation upon reception, is not created in "consideration of the receiver." Furthermore, in considering what a literary work "says," Benjamin asserts that transmitting information is as inessential to the artist as it is to the translator, given that meaning and intention cannot travel within our languages, which cannot make truthful conclusions on the nature and existence of man.²¹ Given that transmission of subject matter is unsuited for language, he offers that "we generally regard that which lies beyond communication in a literary work--even a poor translator will admit that this is its essential substance--as the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic'?"²² Interestingly,

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The bodley head, 2015), 77.

²¹ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 70.

²² Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 70.

literary works obtain a mysterious authority for expressing meaning beyond the language of the text. How then, could translation transmit what is unfathomable in the first? He reckons that it is “a special and high form of life...governed by a special, high purposiveness.”²³ Benjamin does not explicate what this “purposiveness” serves, instead offering that “all purposeful manifestations life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance.”²⁴ Through this formulation, literary works and their ideal translations, manifest a liveliness in language that represents the significance of purpose, rather than the purpose itself. He adds that translation “thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to our answer,” offering that literary language and its growth in translation are in closest proximity to truthful language. Although it is impossible to reveal the “hidden relationship itself,” translation can “represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form,” through analogies and symbols which “draw on other ways of suggesting meaning than intensive - that is, anticipative, intimating - realization.”²⁵ Benjamin alludes to the testimonial status of literature through his focus on translation. By calling ways of communicating meaning “suggestive,” rather than intensive, he alludes to the ways in which literature is able to push against these boundaries of signification. Although Benjamin is focusing on the translator, he situates the translator as an intimate reader of what can be realized by poetic speech. Placing poetic expression in the closest proximity to pure truth, he highlights the value of reading allusive aspects of literature.

He highlights poetic writing’s ability to communicate newfound knowledge beyond language in his discussion of *ways of meaning*. In language, Benjamin offers a distinction

²³ Benjamin, 72.

²⁴ Benjamin, 73.

²⁵ Benjamin, 73.

between the intended object and mode of intention, highlighting how modes of intention can exclude the same object because of the “meaning,” derived in language. Using “Brot” and “pain” as examples of the same intended object *bread*, he writes that “it is because of their modes of intention that the two words signify something different to a German or a Frenchman, that they are not regarded as interchangeable, and in fact ultimately seek to exclude one another.”²⁶ Given that a pure language where intended objects are harmonious is unattainable, the translation explores the ways of meaning in a text to overcome this linguistic barrier. He writes that “Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?”²⁷ If we resignify this practice as one between the writer in a remote relation to their language, symbolic language appears to be a means of introducing the alterity of language within the text. When Benjamin admits that “all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages,” he highlights this division to be an impossible defeat. He continues, noting that “an instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution of this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt,” because pure intention of meaning remains hidden in the multiplicities of languages.²⁸ Benjamin’s essay posits translation as a mode of reading the ineffable aspects of the original text, wherein the translator witnesses what can only be attested to allusively. Offering translation as a means to push the limits of linguistic expression, “knowledge of this remoteness” appears in the ability to transmit and preserve the incommunicable and symbolic aspects of a text.

²⁶ Benjamin, 75.

²⁷ Benjamin, 75.

²⁸ Benjamin, 75.

Kafka and Milena; Translating the Abyss

In the following letters, we see Kafka's world through his correspondences to his translator and lover, Milena Jesenská. He wrote to her from 1920-1923, starting as a business transaction before steadily becoming an affair almost entirely relayed through letters. Kafka's descriptions of Milena's translations and their successes, highlight the ways in which he recognized the persistence of non-arrival in his work. Along with the correspondences regarding her translations, the letters narrate Kafka's story of non-arrival; in the hundred and twenty six letters, he frequently promises to visit Milena but never makes it to the destination. The letters carry the same knowledge of remoteness that is untranslatable/uncommunicable in his literary works, testing the ability of words to fly or traverse the limits of language. Whilst translating Kafka's work into Czech, Milena wrote to Max Brod that "[his] asceticism is altogether unheroic—and by that very fact all the greater and more sublime."²⁹ Milena's sense of Kafka and her proximity to him, reads similarly to Deleuze and Guattari's claim that Kafka "will make the German language take flight on a line of escape. He will feed himself on abstinence; he will tear out of Prague German all the qualities of underdevelopment that it has tried to hide; he will make a cry with an extremely sober and rigorous cry."³⁰ Paired with Milena's insight, they both emphasize a sense within Kafka that is ascetic, sobered, and unheroic; characteristics that unwittingly attest to the indestructible *poesis* of his thought.

In Kafka's letters to Milena he describes her Czech translation of his short stories *The Stoker* and *A Country Doctor*. Through this correspondence, I offer the intimacy of translation as an act of reading the indestructible. Kafka's fascination with Milena's fidelity to his text offers

²⁹ Benjamin Balint, *Kafka's Last Trial*

³⁰ Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 26.

his readers a notion of translation that preserves what is sacredly literary and not translatable in the original piece. In Kafka's first letter regarding Milena's translated manuscripts, he states that he was "almost disappointed" with Milena for sending him what he calls "the all-too-familiar voice from the old grave."³¹ It is all together unclear if this familiar voice is the translated text or rather the voice of the text beyond its linguistic framing. He continues asking, "Why did it get between us? And then I remembered that it also acted as a mediator between us. What's more incomprehensible to me that you've taken upon yourself this great labor, and I am deeply moved by the faithfulness with which you've done it, sentence for sentence, a faithfulness I wouldn't have thought possible in the Czech language,"³² The problem Kafka describes is linguistic. He expresses the language of the text as a barrier and a bridge—both a blockade and a path. This is further complicated by Kafka's next statement, wherein he implies that this language is less incomprehensible than Milena's faithful labor of translation. Given Kafka's style of writing, he alludes to the difficulty of his lengthy sentences and considers it a barrier to his translatability. His German texts are constructed with lengthy sentences that intentionally suspended its bearings onto the last word. Furthermore, his surprise is also found in relation to the Czech language, which he spoke but never felt capable of writing in. He writes of her translation akin to Benjamin, applauding her ability to realize his way of meaning and transfer it to Czech. He alludes to his writing and its complexity in a later letter, in which he abruptly ends a lengthy anecdote with a shocking reflection.

Where am I trying to lead you with this? I've lost my way a little, but it doesn't matter, for perhaps you've been following me and now both of us are lost. That's just the beauty of your translation, that it is faithful...--well that is 'faithful' and that I have the sensation of leading you by the hand behind me along the subterranean, dark, low, ugly corridors of the

³¹ Kafka, *Letters*, 24.

³² Kafka, *Letters*, 24.

story, almost endlessly (that's why the sentences are endless, didn't you realize this?) almost endlessly (only two months, you say?) in order to have, I hope, the good sense to disappear on reaching the bright daylight at the exit.³³

Here, we read Kafka directly commenting on an untranslatable poiesis at play within his text. He begins reflecting on the ceaseless interminability of his letter and exemplifies it as an intentional endlessness. The object of faithfulness Kafka describes to Milena is the extralinguistic incommunicability within the original text. He writes to her as a reader of the dark corridors within the text that are not reducible to the text itself and paradoxically calls it the faithfulness of her translation. It is a faith required in reading Kafka's written word; his "almost endless," sentences do not point to an end. Instead, he hopes for misunderstanding through his writing—hoping his readers will have "the good sense to disappear on reaching the bright daylight at the exit." Kafka's literature offers an escape from the struggles he faced in his community, allowing him to become lost with his readers in the complexities of his works. In a sense, he resignified his absent community through this literature.

³³ Kafka, *Letters*, 51.

Chapter Two:

Belief, Community, and Memory

In Kafka's novel *The Trial*, the accused man Joseph K. finds himself indeterminately guilty of an unknown crime, brought against a force he cannot adequately defend himself from. The opening sentence, "someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning,"³⁴ lays the impossibility of making sense of his circumstances or attesting to the truth of his innocence. Throughout the novel, the opening lines do not gain further elucidation and yet the relevance of the statement does not dissipate. Despite his fate, K. imagines the accusations of the sovereign forces he is condemned by to be refutable. K.'s hope for justice appears to be misguided, placating his anger by assuming the Law will strive for truth and fairness, despite its actions directly opposing this.

Disillusionment is inevitable in the schema of this novel, and K. discovers no one has ever evaded a sanction of guilt. Despite K. being the main character, there is no recourse to exceptionality. Kafka's statement to Max Brod, "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope - but not for us," holds true in this tale, wherein K. is doomed to dedicate all his energy towards postponing his eventual sentencing – or otherwise be subject to the courts' absent logic.³⁵ If a trial occurs in the tale, it does not remain bound to the courtroom arena, attesting to the lack of order the universal terms operate within. As a form of testimony, the work deconstructs the communicability of truth through which the sovereign power "the Law," acts as an unintelligible discursive force with opaque epistemological origins.

³⁴Franz Kafka et al., *The Trial*, Definitive ed (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995), 1.

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The bodley head, 2015), 113.

The Law purports its oppressive authority over truth in the chapter, "In the Cathedral," where a priest judges K. to be delusional for his misunderstandings of his case. Joseph K. enters the cathedral under the impression of meeting an Italian tourist only to find a priest of the prison, who he infers to be preparing for a sermon. However, like many figures in the novel, the priest does not assume his assigned role. The priest is later revealed to be the prison chaplain and offers K. a lesson Kafka's earlier published parable "Before the Law." This occurs when the accused man, having confessed to carrying a particular trust in the priest, is warned against his "delusions" for his individuation of the priest. This instance--like his earlier interactions with the lawyers, painter Titorelli, and officials of the court--offers hope for K. to finally derive the knowledge of the Law. Similar to all K.'s interactions, the preamble to the elusive documents merely reiterates the totalizing disablement of truth in the Law's language. Like Kafka's paradoxical statement on infinite hope, yet none for his community; there is a plentitude of established truth in the parable with no access to understanding for the interpreter.

The parable quoted by the priest describes a man from the country, who travels to the gates of the Law intending to enter its facade. Upon asking for admittance by a doorkeeper, he is told that "it is possible...but not at the moment."³⁶ When questioning the logic that has deemed the man inadmissible, the doorkeeper tells the man that he can enter, but will only find more hallways with increasingly powerful doorkeepers that even *this* doorkeeper cannot stand to face. The man waits at the first door until his last days, constantly asking for admittance. In the man's dying moments, the parable does not elucidate what gives the Law its status in spite of its blatant lawlessness. With failing vision and no strength to stand, the man sees a "a radiance that streams

³⁶ Kafka, *The Trial*, 213.

inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law."³⁷ This strange symbol of hope, draws the man to formulate a question he never thought to ask the doorkeeper before.

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 altered much 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 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." ³⁸

The impetus of the parable comes with the doorkeeper closing the doors as though the man should have known all along. The priest offers opinions of many commentators, who mention that the doorkeeper deceives his title in his final action because the doors have always been opened. He also notes that neither the doorkeeper or the man from the country enter the interior of the law, which confuses the doorkeepers assumed authority. Despite being a part of the organization, the doorkeeper is equally excluded from the very force he represents. The priest states that the doorkeeper is the one deceived in his position, yet it is unclear if this is the same delusion the parable is intended to teach K. about.

If the conceptual paradigm of the parable is asserted to be the teaching of a *delusion*, can this be upheld under its definition as "an idiosyncratic belief or impression that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality or rational argument"?³⁹ If a subject is deemed delusional for having confidence in an unjustified belief that is refuted by and contradictory to communal consensus, then *the Trial* inverts the relations within

³⁷ Kafka, 214.

³⁸ Kafka, 214-15.

³⁹ Lisa Bortolotti, "Delusion" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), accessed May 1, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/delusion/>.

this contradiction. In the parable, The Law conceals its authority derived from a particular set of beliefs that does not reveal itself in rational language, operating as an unquestionable idiosyncrasy. Through this inversion, the man from the country and K. both carry rational beliefs, but are marked “delusional” for desiring clarification about the law’s credentials. The law carries authority similar to “pure language” Benjamin explores in “The Task of the Translator.” For if there is a true language or true law, its existence is without origins and can merely be alluded to or realized. It is as though K. and the man from the country are unable to translate the speech of the original parable, which is realized by the doorkeeper and priest. The commentators on the text derive that “the right perceptions of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other,”⁴⁰ which undermines the possibility of perfect rationality for any actor within the Law. The priest complicates this notion of delusion further when he notes that “the scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentators' despair.”⁴¹ The commentators, like K., are characterized to be in despair when looking for a rational understanding of the parable. What appears as despair is a product of readers searching for contextualization of the indiscernible moral principle at play within the text.

When discussing perspectives on the text and their acceptability, K. asserts that accepting the point of view of the doorkeeper as reliable turns everything he says into truth. The priest replies that “it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.”⁴² K.'s final statement is that the acceptance of any point of view “turns lying into a

⁴⁰ Kafka, *The Trial*, 216.

⁴¹ Kafka, *The Trial*, 217.

⁴² Kafka, 220.

universal principle." The narrator adds that "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."⁴³ At this moment, K.'s reading of the story is exceeded by the text's possibilities of understanding and misunderstanding. He decides, without *finality*, that contradictions of the text can only be suited for the Law. His inability to understand the knowledge offered within the parable draws him to view its secrets to be better fitted for the Court. In K.'s conclusions, the Law and its idiosyncratic claims to credence cannot be accessed nor believed, refusing to communicate a believable truth.

The Necessity of Belief

"Before the Law" and its textualization as a parable within the novel, functions as a testimony to what the parable does not actualize as truth. Whether it is because the speaking subject lies, or the unpredictability of the future turns truth into deception, testimony is entangled with the necessity of an *other* believing an event that can only be attested to. In Derrida's notion of the oath, or testimonial claims to truth, he proves the act of swearing to be necessarily contaminated by the unpredictability of perjury. Furthermore, he questions the ability of the oath to be effaced by the futurity of language. This contaminant is not an impending threat. It is always already an *other* within the unrepresentable truth as a secret. The priest's proclamation of the Law as necessary rather than truthful emphasizes the status of truth as presupposed to enable its possibility in the future. The doorkeeper must defer entrance without dismissing the man, just

⁴³ Kafka, 219-20.

as it is necessary to assert the necessity of truth as simultaneously indispensable and elusive. The state of delusion K. occupies in relation to the Law is similar to the delusion of expecting the secrecy of a sovereign order to unveil itself without questioning the status of truth it purports. The first page of the book lays out this facade of power presenting as knowledge, where the uniform of the Law's officials is described as looking "eminently practical," even though "one could not quite tell what actual purpose it served."⁴⁴

Returning to K.'s formulation that *believing* the doorkeeper has fulfilled his duty "turns lying into a universal principle," I would like to consider how this status of truth as contaminated is understood by Derrida in his book "Demeure, Fiction and Testimony." Conducting a seminar on Fiction and Testimony, Derrida unravels the contradictory status of testimony and literature as possible only through their entanglement. I would like to test these claims against the status of testimony within *The Trial*, wherein literature, although fictive, speaks on the irreducibility of testimony, perjury, and the secret, which create evidence out of an unprovable instance Derrida notes that, "As a promise to *make truth*....testimony always goes hand in hand with at least the *possibility* of fiction, perjury, and lie." In order to prove testimony to be always implicated by fiction, he considers testimony by its negation. He postulates that "Were this possibility to be eliminated, no testimony would be possible any longer; it could no longer have the meaning of testimony."⁴⁵ This is a notion that may seem to claim validity by the simplicity of its self-evidence; however, this irreducibility is founded through what it cannot give over in testimony. This is what Derrida calls the *secret*, which I read to be the referent of the testimony

⁴⁴ Kafka, 1.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Elizabeth Rottenberg, *The Instant of My Death / Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 27-8.

that does not have a referent itself. He writes that “I must be able to keep secret precisely what I testify to; it is the condition of the testimony in the strict sense, and this is why one will never be able to demonstrate, in the sense of a theoretical proof or a determinate judgment, that a perjury or lie has in fact taken place.”⁴⁶

Through Derrida’s analysis, testimony is indiscernible from fiction insofar as they both require a suspension of doubt. His assertion that fiction takes the same role as testimony considers how both cannot be proved as *true* but necessitate an act of *belief*. He offers that these identical discourses—fiction and testimony—are presented differently, which complicates their perceptibility. He writes that “one can be lying if it presents itself as serious and non-fictitious, but the other (the same in its content) is no longer lying if it surrounds itself with the distinctive signs of literary fiction.”⁴⁷ These signs are designated by the authority of the title literature, which presupposes statements such as “the narrator is not the author, no one has committed himself here to telling the truth before the law, thus no one can be accused of lying.” Despite making a comparison, Derrida follows his last claim with the question “is this limit ever so clear and can it remain that way?”⁴⁸

These claims, and the limitations of truth they imply, become unperceivable and left to the act of believing what one writes or testifies to in language. I would like to consider Derrida’s notion of testimony and fiction, along with their inescapable ties to perjury and deception in *The Trial*. Can no one be accused of lying in this novel? Is the limit unclear and susceptible to change? The novel is animated by K.’s desire to tell the truth before the law and dispel the

⁴⁶ Derrida, *The Instant of My Death*, 30.

⁴⁷ Derrida, 37.

⁴⁸ Derrida, 37.

accusations made against him. This is what Derrida calls the content of the discourse, which is equal to testimony until it is presented within literature. In a novel that enacts what disables literature's claims to truth whilst making it more believable than reality, Kafka writes beyond literature to the boundaries of its testimonial value. From the beginning, we read K.'s innocence to be self-evident. Reading *The Trial* is to first believe in the testimony of the accused man, which cannot be believed by any of his interlocutors in the Courts. Just as Derrida noted, our belief in K. is ensured through reading his claims through literature. This is complicated by the world of Joseph K where his claims are presented in a non-fictive reality that assumes he is lying; and where, just as K. and the commentators read, we are also compelled to look for justice through believing in what cannot be proved. The novel explicates and erodes the division between belief and knowledge, what Derrida calls "the order of attestation," which, "itself testifies to the miraculous, to the unbelievable believable: to what must be believed all the same, whether believable or not."⁴⁹

Kafka wrote many aphorisms on deception and belief, which highlight the incompatibility of language and truth. In one of his aphorisms, he notes "A belief is like a guillotine, just as heavy, just as light."⁵⁰ By way of metaphor, Kafka alludes to the force of belief beyond the weight of language. In this aphorism, belief is compared to a mechanized apparatus that beheads its condemned subject. However, the notion of belief is not tied to the object of the guillotine, and the metaphoric status of belief is called to be "as heavy" and "as light," as the machine. A guillotine can only function with weight, yet the act of believing has no correlation

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other: The Prosthesis of Origin*, Cultural Sightings (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), 20.

⁵⁰ Franz Kafka and Daniel Frank, *Aphorisms*, First edition (New York: Schocken Books, 2015), 108.

to the guillotine as a mode of execution. In this sense, the status of belief is similar to Derrida's notions of the oath and perjury. The miracle of believing is only possible through the improbability of its outcome. Belief, like a guillotine, alludes to executing a promised act that cannot be known to occur. If belief is like a guillotine, deception of belief does not exclude the act of believing, just as the weight of the guillotine does not alter its status as a guillotine.

In Walter Sokel's essay, "Language and Truth," he considers the status of truth in Kafka's work. He notes that "The assumption common to...Kafka's view of language is the demand that truthful speech be the direct emanation of being. It is this view which Jacques Derrida has exposed as 'metaphysical nostalgia' for the impossible presence of the referent--reality or being--in the signifying system that is language."⁵¹ If Kafka believed truthful speech would emanate being, Sokel notes that he believed "the nature of what it is that should be present in truthful speech...is the ideal community," which, "should be the proper *adaequatio* for the activities and emotions which bind the members of the community together."⁵² In Kafka's utopian vision of speech, the oath and social bond is uncontaminated and "adaequatio," which is a latin word for equalizing, adjusting, and adapting. Considering Kafka's writing, his ideal vision contradicts the allusive status of truth in his works. Although his ideal vision contradicts Derrida's notion of the social bond as necessarily contaminated by deception, Sokel notes that Kafka's written world becomes a "countermodel," for his ideal vision.

Sokel explores Kafka's literature as a language of *untruth*, wherein "this debasement of language...allows a substantial elevation of the status of literature." In order to displace language

⁵¹ Walter Sokel, "Language and Truth in the Two Worlds of Franz Kafka," in *Franz Kafka*, ed. Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 176.

⁵² Sokel, "Language and Truth," 176.

from the sensory world, which failed to equalize Kafka and his community, he used “non-referential, merely allusive language,” as “a means by which human beings may receive an inkling of the invisible, true world.”⁵³ As a result of this loss of community and debasement of truthful speech, “the way for literature is therefore not to try to express truth, but to hint at it by showing the undoing of truth.”⁵⁴

Through Sokel’s work, Kafka’s notion of truth is contradictory, deceptive, and can only hint at the truth it shares with the community of readers. Kafka two visions of truth are incommensurable: one being a naturalist view of “community as a collective repository of truth,” and the other, transcendental and spiritualist where “residing in an extrasensory beyond...the withholding of truth alludes to its ineffability.”⁵⁵ Only through literature can both coexist, hinting at the beauties and failures of both visions, purely allusive whilst simultaneously calling onto an ideal community to derive its resonance.

Psychoanalysis and the Failure to Witness

I would now like to consider the literary value of testimony in *the Trial*, through the process of witnessing described in the novel. I argue that Kafka’s K. witnesses his prosecution *belatedly*, which makes his inability to take the place of a witness comparable to Shoshana Felman and Lori Daub’s formulation of witnessing (as a literary and judicial process) in the Eichmann trial. Here, Kafka’s ideas of truth, allusive and ideal, necessarily rely on each other. In

⁵³ Sokel, “Language and Truth,” 180.

⁵⁴ Sokel, “Language and Truth,” 180.

⁵⁵ Sokel, “Language and Truth,” 181.

the wake of the Holocaust, witnessing and testifying to the truth of the event could only be possible through the communal act of reading what alludes speech.

Shortly after K.'s arrest, he offers testimony to the event twice; however, both times he offers the *event* as an absence, offering it as an occurrence with no importance. In the first conversation, K. approaches Fräulen Bürstener desiring to tell her what occurred in his apartment next door that morning. However, when she asks him to relay the event to her, he replies: "The actual manner in which it happened isn't worth mentioning." She emphasizes that "surely that is the really interesting part," and upon K.'s denial of her statement she cautiously replies: "I don't want to pry into secrets; if you insist that it is uninteresting, I shall not argue on the point."⁵⁶ Although he has asked Fräulen Bürstener to listen to him, K. becomes mute when prompted to testify to the event that has just occurred. To him it is uninteresting, which creates a secret of the instant, suspending it into the past because K. cannot believe what had happened to him. Fräulen Bürstener assumes K. to be carrying a secret; however, in the sense that the secret is beyond his conscious awareness, his testimony becomes prejerous to his intent of proving his innocence. He cannot be acquitted by us, or any of his interlocutors because the tale does not include the instant that created his misfortune.

The second time he testifies, K. appears at the Court of Inquiry to argue for his innocence. Once again, he testifies to "what has happened to *me*" and trivializes the event. After calling attention to an occurrence, K. attempts to read the faces of the first row, qualifying that it gave "his speech a somewhat disconnected effect." Considering his conversation with Fräulen Bürstener, it is interesting that the second time he testifies to the event, without changing his

⁵⁶ Kafka, *The Trial*, 24.

opinions, he becomes aware of his disconnect from the event. He goes on to say: “what has happened to me is only a single instance and as such of no great importance, especially as I do not take it very seriously, but it is representative of a misguided policy which is being directed against me and other people as well. It is for these that I take up my stand here, not for myself.”⁵⁷

In his claims for justice, K. implicates other victims of the Courts and Law; yet, he cannot acknowledge what has occurred to any of them and insists that it is not to be taken seriously, further contradicting his position as a witness testifying in court. The disconnected effect of his speech highlights the incommensurable positions of the audience and himself, which cause his plight to continue on in the novel.

In Shoshanna Felman and Lori Daub’s book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub analyze the resignification of testimony enabled by psychoanalysis and literature. Felman offers that:

Psychoanalysis...recognizing for the first time in the history of culture, that one does not have to *possess* or *own* the truth, in order to effectively *bear witness to it*; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial; and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, *not available* to its own speaker.⁵⁸

Following the traumas of the First and Second World War, psychoanalysis necessarily rethinks the status of the subject bearing truth, wherein witnessing became impossible for those persecuted by regimes of oppression. Lori Daub’s psychoanalytic work with Holocaust survivors testifies to this paradox of witnessing: “The victims narrative—the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma—does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an

⁵⁷ Kafka, *The Trial*, 42.

⁵⁸ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 15.

event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence.”⁵⁹ Daub describes the victims testimony as *narrative*, highlighting the productivity of literary conceptualization, where the unimaginable occurrence can only find language through the institution of literature. Laub activates the role of learning, wherein he must listen to what is unfathomable in order to give it language and restore justice to its status. Here, we read resonances of Derrida’s conceptualization of literature’s ability to activate belief in what is unknown or seemingly fictive, along with revitalizing the static ontologies of reason tied to other institutions.

Through these insights, K.’s inability to speak of the event offers no evidence, and yet, simultaneously *bears witness to it* as an *absence*. Although he may know what has happened to him, he cannot take it seriously nor give it importance. However, his second testimony of the event in court alludes to the absence of the event that *represents* a historical injustice. He stands before the Court of Inquiry and testifies to the communal sanction of guilt upon people who, through the purposeless violence of the system, cannot bear witness through the system that “out of nothing at all” conjures “an enormous fabric of guilt”.⁶⁰ In connection to Laub’s notion of witnessing an event that “produced no witnesses,” we are able to conceptualize the difficulty of historically accounting for the past, as an unfounded weight of guilt. Laub notes a characteristic of the Holocaust’s traumatic event on its victims where: “the very circumstance of *being inside the event* ... made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the event that was taking place, and provide an independent frame of

⁵⁹Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57.

⁶⁰ Kafka, *The Trial*, 149.

reference through which the event could be observed.”⁶¹ Considering witnessing an event of this magnitude needing a frame of reference or a total understanding in order to be observed, the overwhelming traumas of presently witnessing the event cannot be brought to light from the instance to its totalization as an event. In Kafka’s book, there is a similar effect wherein the fabric of guilt actualizes in the present, assuming justification from a fictive past without historical remembrance. It also highlights the productive status of literature, where allusive language “establishes the otherness of language in regards to truth, not as a defect, but as the necessary condition for the fulfillment of a proper and essential function.”⁶² In this case, the ability to allude to the absence of truth as an emanation of being, reinscribes the failures of language into a narrative of non-belonging.

Justice and Narrative Art

These notions of trauma and historical witnessing are touched upon in Walter Benjamin’s essay *Franz Kafka*. Benjamin was an astute reader of the eschatological resonances in Kafka’s work and in this reading he highlights Kafka’s ability to write *uncanny* awareness unto K. 's community of speakers. Reading *newness* as though nothing was new, Benjamin highlights the ability of Kafka’s literature to situated the past as *guilt* and future as *justice*. However, Benjamin notes that for Kafka the past cannot dissipate:

In the mirror which the prehistoric world held before him in the form of guilt he merely saw the future emerging in the form of judgment. Kafka, however, did not say what it was like. Was it not the Last Judgment? Does it not turn the judge into the defendant? Is the trial not the punishment? Kafka gave no answer. Did he expect anything of his

⁶¹ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 81.

⁶² Sokel, “Language and Truth,” 180.

punishment? Or was he not rather concerned to postpone it? In the stories which Kafka left us, narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: to postpone the future.⁶³

Interestingly, he positions the future to be *merely justice*, as though this justice is not enough.

The mirror of the prehistoric, or the past without history, reflects a guilt that cannot find reference. However, this form of guilt, suspended as myth, pervades and postpones the future.

The impossibility of differentiating trial from punishment, judge from defendant, justice and its postponement, revitalizes the narrative act as a process of witnessing truth through its omission.

He notes that Kafka's storytelling delays the future, through a problematization of understanding the past. Benjamin considers this in *the Trial*, noting that:

Whenever figures in the novels have anything to say to K., no matter how important or surprising it may be, they do so casually and with the implication that he must really have known it all along. It is as though nothing new was being imparted, as though the hero was just being subtly invited to recall to mind something he had forgotten.⁶⁴

In a novel where the witness cannot bring the event to be witnessed by others, assumed understanding pervades in an uncanny form, which undermines the meaning of *understanding* as such. The subtlety of these invitations toward imparted knowledge, although belated, emphasize the ability of K.'s interlocutors to witness what he cannot. The painter, Titorelli, exemplifies this problem when, informing K. of his case, he states that "If you are innocent, then the matter is quite simple," contradicting his earlier claim that the court is impervious to proof of innocence. When K. asks how contradictory statements could both be true, the painter replies: "Impervious only to proof which one brings before the Court," whilst "raising one finger as if K. has failed to

⁶³ Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 124-125.

⁶⁴ Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," 127.

perceive a fine distinction.”⁶⁵ Although the forces against K. appear to understand what he cannot recall, their authority does not imply truthfulness. What becomes of justice in these contemplations of community, truth, and the law? If the forces of the Law and their truth are as fruitless as K.’s claim to innocence, justice appears to be an impossible goal. Benjamin’s reading of Kafka situates the law as entangled with myth, positing assistants of the law to be celestial “beings in an unfinished state,” who are “neither members of, nor strangers to, any of the other groups of figures, but, rather, messengers from one to the other...they have not yet been completely released from the womb of nature.”⁶⁶ Liminal beings, halfway between myth and the nature that predates myth, the law is scripture without the sacramental authority of myth. The assistants in the Trial become messenger angels condemned to be endless forces of movement that Benjamin offers as the only figures of hope in Kafka’s literature. Benjamin asserts Kafka’s world to be older than myth, raising his work to a tradition “which has been promised redemption by the myth,” yet is “incomparably younger,” drawing Benjamin to conclude, “if we can be sure of one thing, it is this: Kafka did not succumb to its [myth’s] temptation.”⁶⁷

Conceiving justice as a critique of myth, Benjamin asserts justice as a point of departure rather than a conclusive resolution.

Kafka does not use the word “justice,” yet it is justice which serves as the point of departure for his critique of the myth. But once we have reached this point, we are in danger of missing Kafka by stopping here. Is it really the law which could thus be invoked against the myth in the name of justice?.... The law which is studied and not practiced any longer is the gate to justice. The gate to justice is learning. And yet Kafka does not dare attach to this learning the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah. His assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer, his students

⁶⁵ Kafka, *The Trial*, 151.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 113.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” 114.

are pupils who have lost the Holy Writ. Now there is nothing to support them on their “untrammelled, happy journey.”⁶⁸

Literature and Deconstruction

How can literature testify to incommunicable events and contest language that resists truthful accounts of experience? Derrida explicitly discusses literature’s authority in his interview with Derek Attridge titled “This Strange Institution Called Literature.” Before addressing this interview, I will attempt to offer how deconstruction as a critical analysis, which insists on contradictions, is relevant to this notion of literature and its relationship to universalisms. In the introduction of Derrida’s book *Acts of Literature*, Derek Attridge, who assisted in editing and compiling this work, notes that “Neither the language of communality and historical laws nor the language of individuality and pragmatic freedom matches deconstruction’s insistence on the structural interconnectedness of the absolutely singular and the absolutely general, necessitating a new understanding of both ‘absolutes’”.⁶⁹ I quote this to emphasize what he aptly notes as the consequence of interconnected singularity and generality, which is a “strong ethico-political summons implicit in the constant attention in these essays to the uniqueness of the other, the function of alterity in any movement or consciousness of the self, and the call to and dependence upon the other in any signature and any signed text.”⁷⁰ I will assert that this reading of deconstruction “as an attentiveness to alterity in any movement or consciousness of the self” holds true and is relevant to my project and Derrida’s readings of literature, along with Kafka’s attentiveness to alterity and truth in his writings. What

⁶⁸ Benjamin, 135.

⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, “Preface,” in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

⁷⁰ Derrida and Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 26-27.

Deconstruction and Kafka's literature do with contradictions and their formulation of language as responsible for alterity is the enabling question of this chapter. Further, I would like to consider why a mode of address – rather than answering a contradiction – preserves attention to the uniqueness of the other. Derrida's conceptualization of singularity and generalization, in interplay, creates an economy of literature that condenses whilst preserving its singularity. He notes the particular danger of resolving this paradox in his interview, noting:

Precisely because this trait, date, or signature--in short, the irreducible and untranslatable singularity of the unique-it is iterable as such, it both does and does not form a part of the marked set. To insist on this paradox is not an anti-scientific gesture--quite the contrary. To resist this paradox in the name of so-called reason or of a logic of common sense is the very figure of a supposed enlightenment as the form of modern obscurantism.⁷¹

By insisting on a paradoxical relationship within language, Derrida highlights the difficulties of critiquing language with attentiveness to what is beyond common sensibilities. The alterity of the text as an *other* does not reduce the limits of epistemology, but rather teaches how to read in a way that can push against the limitations of what we know. In doing so, we simultaneously preserve what enables this possibility as something to come (futuraity): what both is and is not a part of a marked set or definable trait of language.

In the above-mentioned interview, Derrida discusses the ways in which Kafka (among other modern writers) rethink what it means to write literature. He notes that “these texts operate a sort of turning back, they *are* themselves a sort of turning back on the literary institution...And the force of their event depends on the fact that thinking about their own possibility (both general and singular) is put to work in them in a *singular* work.”⁷² In this formulation, Derrida emphasizes the act of writing literature as a consideration made by the author. He notes that these

⁷¹ Derrida and Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 43.

⁷² Derrida and Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 42.

writers have a unique force that, through forming a part of the general set of literature, “turn back” on the literary institution. This is done by questioning the role of possibility within the work, which Derrida’s later writings on fiction highlight to be a possibility of belief and chance. It is questioning that is “also linked to the act of a literary performativity and a critical performativity (or even a performativity in crisis),” which Derrida sees as the ability “to write so as to put into play or keep the singularity of the date (what does not return, what is not repeated, promised experience of memory as promise, experience of ruin or ashes); and at the same time, through the same gesture, to question, to analyze, transform this strange contradiction, this institutional institution.”⁷³ In Derrida’s formulation of literature, the literary act in play offers traces of the unreturnable “experience of ruin or ashes,” that is possible through the realm of literature where the ambiguity of the text is questioned, analyzed, and transformed after being written. He notes that this “ruin” has implications for what we consider as history, or rather, the interplay of the instant and its rendering, of testimony and knowledge. Derrida notes that the singularity of the date and its general form as literature preserves what cannot be textualized as a performance of the text as a history. Although he writes that this is a history “of a ruin, the narrative of a memory which produces the event to be told and which will never been present,” he adds that “Nothing can be more ‘historical,’ but this history can only be thought by changing things, in particular, its thesis or hypothesis of the present--which means several other things as well, doesn’t it?”⁷⁴ He views literary interpretation as a sort of continual, revived attentiveness to formulations of the past, which will never become entirely present. A formulation that offers literature as a testimony to forgotten meanings, a mode that preserves alterity and redefines the

⁷³ Derrida and Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 42.

⁷⁴Derrida and Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, 42.

practice of reading. Furthermore, this literature lends itself to the traumatic excess of events that are outside of remembrance, understanding, and historical address.

Chapter Three:

Testimony of the Divided Subject

If there exists a "discourse" which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction-productive violence, in short it is "literature," or, more specifically, the text.⁷⁵

In the above quote, Julia Kristeva explores Derrida's considerations of literature, offering it the possibility of unraveling discourse by *resignifying* the relationship between social belonging and subjectivity in language. Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, semiotician, psychoanalyst, and literary critic, reads language beyond its stagnation as a formalized system, proving literature pushes against what is untenable through linguistic ideological apparatuses. Her interests highlight literary language's influence upon linguistics, which can reinstitute "the status of the subject" regarding "his relation to the body, to others, and to objects."⁷⁶ Calling literature more than the "testimony of a withdrawn body," Kristeva alludes to the corporal aspects of representing existence in literature. Giving voice to the untenable divisions between the body and mind along with the relationality between subjects and objects, this consideration of literature offers a "subject," that is volatile and necessarily vulnerable. What are the consequences of considering the subject as neutral? How is identity, marginality, and heterogeneity negotiated through iterations of subjectivity?

Psychoanalysis is a mode of analysis that resists the neutrality of subjectivity.

Psychoanalytic theory postulates that subjects are divided between their conscious and

⁷⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 16.

⁷⁶ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 15.

unconscious and attempts to reconcile the two through considering the repression of the unconscious in communication. Founded by Sigmund Freud and later revisited by Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis gives unique relevance to testimony as its means of study. In Lacan's formulation, language is introduced in "The Mirror Stage," wherein the act of identifying oneself in a mirror during adolescence, marks a psychosexual phase that regulates, controls, and stratifies the embodied subject; at once relating his embodiment to the sign, "I," and dividing the self from his "unconscious." Shoshanna Felman, as a literary critic and student of psychoanalysis, expresses the profound mode of *reading* psychoanalysis introduces to communicative speech. In her book, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, Felman describes psychoanalytic interpretation:

The analyst is called upon to interpret the excess in the patient's discourse---what the patient says *beyond* what he has been incited to say, beyond the current motivation of the situation; the analytic meaning is then a displacement of the meaning of the patient's discourse, since it consists in giving what has been pronounced *another reading*. The analytic reading is thus essentially the reading of difference that inhabits language, a kind of mapping in the subject's discourse of points of disagreement, or difference from, itself.
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Felman's considerations of testimony in my previous chapter offered that truth does not have to be possessed in order to be witnessed. Building upon this, psychoanalysis considers the importance of the *listener* in relation to testimonial speech. Psychoanalysis remains attentive to the difference between the subject and language, along with the displacement of meaning that is reinscribed in the *excess* of symbolic speech. In this chapter, I focus on the difference "that inhabits language," through the works of another psychoanalyst and literary critic, Julia Kristeva.

⁷⁷ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, 1. pr (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), 21.

Kristeva was a later scholar of psychoanalysis, neither a student nor follower of Lacan and Freud, and as such her work reconsiders psychoanalysis with attentiveness to the divided status of identity and subjectivity.⁷⁸ Similarly to Felman, her works focus on trauma and testimony, but invigorates Lacanian analysis with attention to the eccentricities of language.

One of the means in which Kristeva complicates psychoanalytic formulations is her theory of the *abject*, which posits that the speaking subject in facing the abject is always already in crisis and divided: in a state of *abjection*. Hardly definable, but gestured toward through what it rejects; the abject is the encumbrance that predetermines freedom, rather than a negation it is the familiarity of the lack before its linguistic separation, definiability, or constraint:

the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders...something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object..it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us... what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.⁷⁹

Here, signification breaks down and becomes a mode of protection from the abject. Through the abject, the self and other, inside and outside, and all modes of signification based on difference are put into disarray. “Identity, system, order,” as Kristeva situates them, are conveyed as borders, positions, rules, or laws of being-through-language, which cast off the abject despite its persistence in discrete forms. In spite of this, Kristeva finds its language in literature. In her book, *Desire in Language*, she notes that literary practices are an “exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language,” which acts as “an activity that liberates the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic, and social networks; as a dynamism that breaks up the inertia of language

⁷⁸Emily Zakin, “Psychoanalytic Feminism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis>.

⁷⁹Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

habits and grants linguists the unique possibility of studying the becoming of the significations of signs."⁸⁰ Gesturing towards the abject as an embodiment of what cannot be embodied within "the significations of signs," Kristeva notes that "Great modern literature unfolds over that terrain: Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Celine."⁸¹ She describes this terrain as "that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other," wherein, "'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again-inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject."⁸² Kristeva points out the abject as apriori to the formulation of language, emerging between the *chora* and *mirror stage*. The *chora* is the earliest stage of psychosexual development, when we have not yet become separated from our mothers or created a boundary between the self and other. She notes the abject to be this movement, where we are not yet separated, but have begun to break. A movement regarded as "our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language." She describes the abject as "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling."⁸³ The abject offers a means of describing a preexisting traumatic break that enables language, whilst considering its pervasiveness beyond its origin.

Through this theoretical perspective, the abject in literature is not the same as that in prelinguistic development. Rather, the abject in contemporary literature finds its form in the articulation of its impossibility. She calls this writing, which she attributes to Kafka "possible at

⁸⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University press, 1980), 178-9.

⁸¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 18.

⁸² Kristeva, *Powers*, 18.

⁸³ Kristeva, *Powers*, 13.

last, of that impossible constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity,” which nevertheless puts forward “a sublimation of abjection.”⁸⁴ By sublimating the abject, which cannot be made socially acceptable, it takes a new form. Kristeva notes that this literature “becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity...a sublimation without consecration. Forfeited.”⁸⁵ Existing on the fringes, literary abjection posits itself at the rift between distinctions of identity, social formation, and community before they are consecrated and regulated by social structures. The abject is an incredibly powerful notion that exists as marginality that is not yet marginalized--creating an affect of horror, disgust, and even humor.

I aim to consider the abject in Kafka’s literature, considering how his figures confuse delineations between subject and object, human and animal, revolt and compromise in their testimonial narratives. Exploring Kafka’s figures, they emphasize the toils of social integration, the ambiguity of relationality, and the violence of readily assumed logic. Kristeva considers the role of writing and its relationship to dominant ideology in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Considering language as a means of describing the world through a common system, writing posits “our view of society and of our place in it a specific orientation” and “includes all those things that we take for granted, that we do not question because we assume they are true.”⁸⁶ This bears semblance to Walter Benjamin’s claim that those who impart knowledge in the Trial spoke to K. as if he should have known all along. However, in his literature assumed truthfulness is hardly taken for granted, instead becoming the epistemological fulcrum of the story. Kristeva

⁸⁴ Kristeva, *Powers*, 26.

⁸⁵ Kristeva, *Powers*, 26.

⁸⁶ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 8.

attributes this intervention upon language to the literary author who “is also conscious of being situated in a moment of history, acted upon and reacting to (and perhaps against) historical forces or currents.”⁸⁷ Looking at Kafka's short stories “A Hunger Artist,” and “Report to An Academy,” I will consider how literary abjection operates in these texts through the testimonial narratives of each work.

A Hunger Artist: Perversion, “Art,” and “Narrativized Abjection”

“A Hunger Artist,” published in 1924, is one of the last works Kafka prepared for publishing. The short story follows its protagonist named “the hunger artist,” who performs fasting for large audiences, as he experiences the decline of public interest in his craft. Absurdly, the man's craft enables his revulsion of food to be socially assimilated into society, which is dramatized by his stubborn distaste for breaking his fast. Through free indirect discourse, the hunger artist's inner thoughts testify to his incommunicable abjection to food and highlight the division between the subject and his subjectivity. In the last lines of the tale, the artist finally testifies to his dejected status. Emaciated and moments away from death, the artist asks to be forgiven for seeking admiration for his fasting. When asked why his fasting should not be admired he replies that “I had to fast. I couldn't do anything else,” going on to confess “I couldn't find food which I enjoyed. If I had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart's content, like you and everyone else.”⁸⁸ It is one of the few times the artist speaks--rather than being spoken in narration. His speech testifies to the division between his mind and body, the comfort of becoming a spectacle rather

⁸⁷ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 8.

⁸⁸ Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 271.

than finding community support. Instead, the artistry the fasting man partakes in offers him a path to become socially accepted--even admired. However, he discovers that withholding his aversion to food betrays his satisfaction with the admiration he acquires.

His spectators included elders who regarded him as “a joke that happened to be in fashion,” along with children who “stood open-mouthed, holding each other’s hands for greater security, marveling at him.” Sitting upon straw and wearing black tights “with his ribs sticking out so prominently,” the artist performs inside a cage as though he was a circus animal. Absurdly, the public appoints the town’s butchers to be the hunger artists’ watchmen. Why would slaughters, dressers, and merchants of animal flesh and cadavers be the ones to surveil the emaciated man? The alterity between the artist and his guards makes the guards suspicious of the artist's abstinence from food and his denial of nutrients; they could not imagine any reward coming from the practice of fasting to such extreme degrees. Kristeva would refer to this denial as “food loathing,” “the most elementary and archaic form of abjection.” One example is the reaction to looking at repugnant food or filth that evokes “the shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.”⁸⁹

She narrates the disintegration of the “self” as a disorder of identification:

“I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*. I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that “I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 2-3.

⁹⁰ Kristeva, *Powers*, 2-3.

The hunger artist cannot assimilate to the food that is meant to nourish him after extreme lengths of time. At the expense of death, the fasting the artist describes as an act unscathed from capacities of limitation is unable to be integrated into the symbolic system. His reasons for refraining from food are concealed by the performance of his craft. However, the narrativization of his body attests to the procession of “becoming an other at the expense of [his] own death.” The representation of his body in the tale, testifies to his condition beyond speech alluding to the “mute protest of the symptom,” that is inscribed but not integrated in the symbolic system, refusing to be called to or answered to until the artist's last moments.

The impresario takes charge of the artist's show and decides when the artist must break his fast. He never allows the fasts to continue past the forty-fifth day, given that the hunger artist's admiration is won by celebrating his nourishment. By celebrating the artist's completion of the fast, the impresario manipulates his audiences into believing the hunger artist's role---despite his constant dissatisfaction with fast-breaking. The artist knew “how easy it was to fast,” calling it “the easiest thing in the world.”⁹¹ Beyond the limits of human comprehension and at the highest proximity to death, the hunger artist's fast is said to have held out for “an illimitably long time,” but the hunger artist is not satisfied. Narrating the drive of the artist, the short story contemplates the limits of starvation asking: “why stop now, when he was in his best fasting form, or rather, not yet quite in his best fasting form?”⁹² By imposing grotesque significance to “fasting form,” the narrative challenges the reader to imagine the extent to which the hunger artist's body could hold out his performance and for what purpose. His desire for

⁹¹ Kafka, “A Hunger Artist,” 271.

⁹² Kafka, “A Hunger Artist,” 271.

communal admiration turns him into a purposeless spectacle. The logic of the text is unbearable and questions the limits of assimilating abject formulations of identity. Preservation and destruction become synonymous to the artist, who believes he can beat “his own record by a performance beyond human imagination since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting.”⁹³ Surely there is a capacity for fasting and yet, death is hardly mentioned as a threat to his craft until the end of the tale. The literature operates as an excess of the artist's discourse, witnessing the ways in which the artists' inner dialogue contradicts his performance on the stage.

Bearing in mind Kristeva's notion of narrated abjection, “the sort that takes up where the apocalypse and carnival left off,” the narrative becomes “a thin film constantly threatened with bursting.”⁹⁴ The hunger artist as a subject dramatizes “the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be *narrated*,” where instead the text, “*cries out* or is *described* with maximal stylistic intensity.”⁹⁵ This is most apparent when the artist describes the despair of not being understood.

His public pretended to admire him so much, why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn't the public endure it? ...And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel, and shook his head, which felt too heavy on his strengthless neck. But then there happened again what always happened. The impresario came forward, without a word--for the band made speech impossible--lifted his arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the straw, this suffering martyr, which indeed he was, although in quite another sense.⁹⁶

The surrounding audience refutes the artist's limitless endurance becoming antagonistic to him for their ignorance of his art. His body and its relative parts do not support each other, bearing

⁹³ Kafka, 271.

⁹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 141.

⁹⁵ Kristeva, 141-2.

⁹⁶ Kafka, “A Hunger Artist,” 271-2.

semblance to objects rather than a complete subject. His body can hardly be narrated in the space he inhabits, as though he is no longer a part of the same scene. Weighed down by his body and contradictory analysis of his subjectivization by the audience, his martyrdom is deceived by the expressionless beliefs his suffering originates from. At this point, the impresario pushes the artist in order to dramatize his exhaustion and make the audience excited for the artist's freedom from fasting. He attempts to stabilize the disorder of meaning, identity, and community the narration explores. Kristeva offers these figures of power to be "the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations," controlling "the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, and thinking; horror that they seize on in order to build themselves up and function."⁹⁷ The impresario is this cunning figure, who attempts to narrate the identity of the hunger artist through rhetoric that purifies the abject by limiting its origins.

The hunger artist's perverse food loathing is made pure by a sublimation of his proximity to the abject; by calling him an "artist," the impresario is able to create a public misunderstanding of the man's fasting, characterizing him as one with "high ambition," "good will," and "great self-denial."⁹⁸ Kristeva defines perversion as the socialized appearance of the abject that "neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts."⁹⁹ In one example, she notes that this perversion "establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss-an artist who practices his art as a 'business.'"¹⁰⁰ The impresario enacts this logic when he claims the hunger artist is practicing magnificent penance

⁹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers*, 210.

⁹⁸ Kafka, "A Hunger Artist." 272.

⁹⁹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 15-6.

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva, *Powers*, 15-6.

and then counters it “by bringing out photographs, which were also on sale to the public, showing the artist on the fortieth day of a fast laying in bed almost dead from exhaustion.”¹⁰¹ His claims purify the artist's abjection and utilize it for the functionality of artistic enjoyment. Death is glorified and capitalized in order to conceal the horror of the artist's identity. At another level of analysis, this exploitative and reductive coercion of subjectivity is countered through literature; which Kristeva argues to be “written out of the untenable aspects of perverse or superego positions.”¹⁰² Through the interplay of text and its narrativization “A Hunger Artist,” explores the untenable boundaries of subjectivity and embodiment through their systemization in language. This is at play throughout the text with the narrativization of the hunger artist on the stage, which is described as a “perversion of the truth, familiar to the artist though it was” that “always unnerved him afresh and proved too much for him.”¹⁰³ The untenable aspects of the narrative, where the boundaries between corruption and morality, authenticity and fraudulence, extreme penance and abjection become disorderly are also exemplary of literature's ability to make signs and their meanings incoherent---drawing us to consider why we thought they were in the first place. The hunger artist's obsession with fasting is purified through the art which reduces the specificity of its signification, whilst the text resists this violence by challenging the assumed purity of artistic practice.

Effects of the Literary Phenomenon

In Julia Kristeva's book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she analyzes the interrelations of psychosomatic, literary, and revolutionary practices, showing how literature attests to crises in

¹⁰¹ Kafka, “A Hunger Artist.” 272-3.

¹⁰² Kristeva, *Powers*, 16.

¹⁰³ Kafka, “A Hunger Artist.” 273.

social structures. Kristeva considers how modern literature can explore how subjectivity has been coerced and given ideological limits through a consideration of language as a system--a system that formulates the body and mind as one "subject." She notes that this "shattering of discourse," highlights three distinct processes that connect subject to ideology.¹⁰⁴ In the first unveiling, linguistic changes compose the status of the subject "his relation to the body, to others, to objects," along with revealing normalized language to be only one mode of "articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself."¹⁰⁵ Through this break, Kristeva questions how these strata become linked together and normative, along with their interrelation in the creation of meaning. This first break in discourse draws her to consider how the capitalist mode of production regulates its subjects beyond linguistics and ideology, insofar as it has also developed in the realms of technology and science. Calling this integration "process qua process," Kristeva asks how art can shatter the coercive practice and expose the productive basis of subject formation--which was once called "sacred" but has now been titled "schizophrenia" in modernity.¹⁰⁶ Lastly, she considers how the history of signifying systems in the arts and religion, which are often "kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying systems," point to a process of significance. This repressed history "underscores the limits of socially useful discourse and attests to what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and his communicative structure."¹⁰⁷ If these modes of signification expose the limits of discourse and what these restrictions repress, Kristeva asks to

¹⁰⁴ Kristeva, 15-6.

¹⁰⁵ Kristeva, 15-6.

¹⁰⁶ Kristeva, 15-6.

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva, 15-6.

what extent and circumstances this use of poetic language is tolerated and necessitated as a means of revolution.

The “Cage” of Subjectivity: Report to an Academy (of Psychoanalysts)

I would like to consider the effectiveness of Kristeva’s insights through Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” which was utilized by Paul B. Preciado, in his lecture to 3,500 psychoanalysts at the École de la Cause Freudienne's annual conference in Paris. Published and translated to English three years after, *Can the Monster Speak?: Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, attests to the oppression of human subjectivity through psychoanalytic discourse and ideology. Preciado likens the transphobic and homophobic reduction of the multiplicities of living bodies to the “cage” that restricts Red Peter in Kafka’s short story. His speech attests to the violence of subject formulation in academic discourse, highlighting the ability of Kafka’s text to unravel significations of the body and subject through an ape’s critique of humanity.

Kristeva, although indebted to psychoanalysis, offers a general critique of its practice which serves as a point of entry to Kafka and Preciado’s works. She notes that psychoanalysis has critiqued and restored what formalism calls “empty signifiers,” to their functioning as psychosomatic “exteriority.” However, psychoanalysis takes this formalization of the mind and body through subjectivity, reducing this process to be “a fragmentary substance... articulated by the developing ego’s connections to the three points of the family triangle.”¹⁰⁸ As I will show later, Preciado critiques theories of the family triangle utilized in particular practices of psychoanalysis, wherein the theory is appropriated under heteronormative reductions of

¹⁰⁸ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 22.

subjectivity to regulate identity. Kristeva does not critique this specific violence of psychoanalysis but does expose the lack created by a “want of a dialectical notion of the signifying process as a whole.” She offers that this lack should shift psychoanalytic discourse, wherein “significance puts the subject in process/on trial,” noting a current lack of attentiveness at present which makes “such considerations, no matter how astute, fail to take into account the syntactico-semantic functioning of language.”¹⁰⁹ Her contributions to feminist psychoanalysis offers theorization of a psychoanalytic subject that should always be considered as “in process/on trial,” given that fixed identities attempt to neutralize difference through generalized terms.¹¹⁰

Borrowing from the narrative structure of “A Report to an Academy,” Preciado aligns himself with Kafka “the greatest analyst of the excesses that hide behind the façade of scientific reason and of the madness commonly referred to as mental health.”¹¹¹ Preciado, like Red Peter, is chosen to speak to an academy for his difference, which they aim to assess in relation to socially acceptable subjectivity. In his report he reflects that:

The most interesting thing in Red Peter’s monologue is that Kafka does not present this process of humanization as a story of emancipation or of liberation from animality, but rather as a critique of colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies. Once captured, the ape says he had no choice: if he did not wish to die locked up in a cage, he had to accept the ‘cage’ of human subjectivity.¹¹²

Red Peter cannot be categorized as simply human or ape, existing between two worlds and yet constrained to the language of humans. Kristeva’s questioning of the limits of social

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Emily Zakin, “Psychoanalytic Feminism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis>.

¹¹¹ Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne (London, United Kingdom: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), 13-4.

¹¹² Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 13.

discourse as processes that exceed the subject and his communicative structure are grappled with in Red Peter's monologue; through the use of poetic language, he gestures to the confinement of his body and mind through the academy's discourse. Along with Kristeva's consideration of literary abjection, "possible at last, of that impossible constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity," Red Peter's monologue testifies to the excesses of the discourse he partakes in when giving his report. His speech signifies beliefs beyond the academy's limits of understanding; describing the regulation of his subjectivity as a necessary path to joining the human community. After being captured by humans, he must choose between two cages: the physical cage of his captivation, or the restriction of his ape identity in order to live as an outsider amongst humans.

Red Peter begins his monologue with a refusal, shifting the subject of the solicited discourse from "the life I formerly led as an ape," to the constraints humanity has put upon his identity. He notes that "I could have returned at first, had human beings allowed it," attributing the impossibility of the academy's request to themselves. He notes that in the beginning, his identity as an ape could be returned to "through an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth," attesting that "as I spurred myself on in my forced career, the opening narrowed and shrank behind me."¹¹³ He alludes to the sacred notion of "heaven," to his audience, offering theological horizons as a transcendence of the earthly universe along with its normative logic. After being apart of humanity for five years, he notes that "the opening in the distance, through which it comes and through which I once came myself, has grown so small that, even if my strength and will power sufficed to get me back to it, I should have to scrape the very skin from

¹¹³Franz Kafka, "A Report to An Academy," in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, 1983rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, n.d.), 250.

my body to crawl through it.”¹¹⁴ This repulsive image highlights the abject horror of his confinement to earth and the irreversible break with himself forced upon him in order to be socially accepted. Expelling his ape-self in order to become a subject, he likens himself to the academy:

To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and great Achilles alike.¹¹⁵

His reliance upon imagery to express himself highlights the ability of poetic speech to signify what the language of the academy restricts. By likening his inability to become an ape again to their impossibility of being an ape, Red Peter alludes to the repression of his past that cannot return to him. Despite his lost origins, he claims every person of the world feels “a tickling at the heels,” highlighting the instability of the present and impossibility of elucidating a clear order to the world.

Through a critique of discourses on humanism and liberated subjectivity being constituent of freedom, Red Peter opposes freedom with an alternative: what he calls “a way out.” He attempts to highlight the words' significance, expressing anxiety over being misunderstood. Using “the word in its most common and fullest sense...deliberately not saying freedom.” In his formulation freedom is socially agreed upon to be “this great feeling of freedom on all sides,” to which he counters: “as an ape, I perhaps recognized it, and I have met human beings who yearn for it. But as far as I am concerned, I did not demand freedom either then or

¹¹⁴ Kafka, “A Report to An Academy,” 250.

¹¹⁵ Kafka, “A Report,” 250.

today. Incidentally, among human beings people all too often are deceived by freedom.”¹¹⁶

Instead of freedom on all sides, Red Peter desires “only a way out—to the right or left or anywhere at all.” Why would freedom, all too great, become a restriction, a deception? To this Red Peter gives an example of the “freedom,” performed by artists on trapezes; he reflects that: “That, too, is human freedom..self-controlled movement.” A masquerade of freedom, Red Peter interprets this movement to be “a mockery of sacred nature!”¹¹⁷ imagining the roaring laughter of apes shaking buildings down at such a display. Here, he questions two opposing notions of “freedom:” one that claims to know freedom, but only speaks of control; the other a sacred notion, which can only be spoken through images.

After reporting on his assimilation into society and appropriation of human behavior in order to become a “man,” Red Peter reflects upon his progress, noting: “with an effort which up till now has never been repeated I managed to reach the cultural level of an average European.” However, he does not see this to be enlightening freedom or divine knowledge, instead, it is simply a way out, which happens to have been through “humanity.”¹¹⁸ He fights through, surviving without being coerced by deceptive freedoms. In his final reflection, the darkness of humanity and its confinement of subjectivity pervades:

As I look back over my development and survey what I have achieved so far, I do not complain, but I am not complacent either. With my hands in my trouser pockets, my bottle of wine on the table, I half lie and half sit in my rocking chair and gaze out of the window....When I come home late at night...there sits waiting for me a half-trained little chimpanzee and I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her; for

¹¹⁶ Kafka, “Report,” 253.

¹¹⁷ Kafka, “Report,” 253.

¹¹⁸ Kafka, “Report,” 258.

she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it.¹¹⁹

As a subject divided, Red Peter does not lie or sit, articulating a refusal of comfort similar to his ambivalence towards his “achievements.” Sitting inside his room, his gaze remains fixed outside the window, emphasizing the impossibility of his representative status in the tale; he is a figure that does not conform to the boundaries of inside and outside. He resignifies the meaning of “comfort” in relation to his muddled existence when describing his encounter with a “half-trained little chimpanzee,” whom he takes *comfort* with “as apes do.” Red Peter’s connotation of comfort is disturbed by his relation to the chimpanzee in the day, emphasizing the unbearable sight of witnessing her loss of identity. He is the sole witness of the “insane look of a bewildered half-broken animal in her eyes,” testifying to the horror of her confinement. He follows this confession by affirming: “In any case, I am not appealing for any man’s verdict, I am only making a report. To you also, honored Members of the Academy, I have only made a report.”¹²⁰ At once speaking in denials, *only* making a report, and “imparting knowledge,” Red Peter’s status in the Academy contests the forms of valuable knowledge they desired from him, testifying against the limited notions of freedom humanity has offered him. In Red Peter and the hunger artist’s stories, both figures push against the limits of language and question how communication is regulated in order to control the multivalent subjectivity of outsiders.

Paul B. Preciado’s speech to École de la Cause Freudienne draws upon the structure and syntax of Red Peter’s report, highlighting the productive possibilities of the literary text as a mode of intervention in the public domain. In his recontextualization and resignification of

¹¹⁹ Kafka, “Report,” 258.

¹²⁰ Kafka, “Report,” 259.

Kafka's work, Preciado's "way out" is found through the "spectacle of political writing."¹²¹ Preciado was hardly able to finish a fourth of his speech before being booed and heckled off the stage.¹²² The transcript of his speech responds to what Kristeva questioned to be the limits of socially acceptable discourse, highlighting the precarity in which poetic revolutionary speech becomes repressed by dominant ideologies. This is apparent in the contradictory results of his speech. Some laughed and booed, with one audience member going so far as to scream "We shouldn't allow him to speak, he's Hitler."¹²³ Other members of the audience applauded him and videos appeared online, striking debates and fissures of psychoanalytic organizations in the days following.¹²⁴ During his speech Preciado critiques the discipline's conformity to ideologies of sexual difference that date back to the colonial era, questioning the violence of stagnating epistemology.¹²⁵ Just as Red Peter had to choose between equally untenable ways out, Preciado critiques binary concepts of transitioning such as "the pharmacological and psychiatric route to domesticated transsexuality and...the anonymity of domesticated masculinity."¹²⁶ Preciado explores the limitations of the signified meanings of "man" and "woman," as cages that could be fought against through "the spectacle of political writing."¹²⁷

Similar Red Peter finding a way out of his limited subjectivity through "aping," humanity, Preciado notes that he had to find a way out through the language that produced discourses on his subjectivity:

¹²¹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 34.

¹²² Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 8.

¹²³ Preciado, 8.

¹²⁴ Preciado, 9.

¹²⁵ Preciado, 9.

¹²⁶ Preciado, 33.

¹²⁷ Preciado, 33-4.

As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition, or to produce a discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognized by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry, I have done as Red Peter did, I have learned the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you.¹²⁸

Preciado enacts Kristeva's notion of attesting to repression through unraveling the materiality of language. Not desiring to be reduced to categorizations of binary reductions, he speaks through the language that is not his own; the coercive language of colonial patriarchy that attempts to limit the possibilities of signification through Manichean binaries that regulate identity.

Rather than being inscribed into a discourse, he pushes against its limits by learning its language in order to resignify its usage of signs: "male," "female," and their relation to "femininity" and "masculinity." This epistemology of sexual and gender identity ignores psychoanalytic theories' attentiveness toward the value of difference and attempts to justify their transphobic practices by claiming knowledgable authority over the limitations of "reasonable" behavior. This misreading of psychoanalysis and epistemological violence propagates a hetero-patriarchal standard "subject" of psychoanalysis, a "necropolitical animal" confused with a "universal human," which "remains, at least until the present, the subject of the central statement in the discourses of the psychoanalytical institutions of colonial modernism."¹²⁹

Coined by critical theorist Achille Mbembe, necropolitics---the politics of death--- are practiced by those deemed sovereign forces of power. It is the coercive ability of dominant discourses, procuring "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."¹³⁰ Through encounters with psychoanalytic discourse, Preciado and other individuals who

¹²⁸ Preciado, 16.

¹²⁹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 17.

¹³⁰ Achille Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11.

exist outside gender and sexual norms are characterized as “beyond neurosis, on the cusp of – or perhaps even within the bounds of – psychosis, being incapable, according to you, of correctly resolving an Oedipus complex or having succumbed to penis envy.”¹³¹ Through dated readings of Freud's theories of psychosexual stages, Preciado critiques the ways in which pharmacological and psychiatric practices attempt to regulate and categorize queer identities. Preciado resists this framework, by abandoning the “framework of sexual difference,” and refusing to conform to anonymous masculinity that attempts to regulate identities to binaries.¹³² He describes his relationship to taking testosterone as a process wherein “the hormone is not an end in itself: it is an ally in the task of inventing an elsewhere.”¹³³ Inventing the meaning of *elsewhere* through a refusal of conformity and acceptance of difference, Preciado points out the deceptiveness of being offered an “ends in itself,” similar to Red Peter’s comparison of freedom to deception. He affirms and elaborates on the political importance of this insight, noting:

Neither then nor now did I ask to be ‘given’ freedom. The powerful constantly promise freedom, but how could they give subalterns something that they themselves do not know? A paradox: they who bind are as imprisoned as they whose movements are hobbled by the knotted ropes. This is no less true of you, esteemed psychoanalysts, the great experts of the unbinding and especially the re-binding of the unconscious, the great promoters of promises or of health and freedom. No one can give what they do not have and what they have never known.

Situating freedom as an unattainable ideal, Preciado highlights the failures of enclosing and limiting the agency of the subject. Given that freedom and truth are unknowable, he highlights that they must be spoken of without limitation. Freedom and knowledge cannot be limited to self-constrained movement on a rope, nor explored without considering pathways elsewhere.

¹³¹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 15-6.

¹³² Preciado, 33.

¹³³ Preciado, 29.

Preciado points out the contradictory logic of constraining liberatory movement to static paradigms of freedom. He questions the ability of the psychoanalysts before him to be self-assured through the comfort of an epistemology they have never considered to be constraining them. Considering the importance of this revelatory speech along with its acknowledgement of Kafka's work, Kristeva's notion of revolutionary poetic language restates the importance of pushing against logic as an "ends in itself." She restates Preciado's previous claim in broader terms, considering ethical knowledge and its veracity:

Finally, our notion of the ethical as coextensive with textual practice separates us from the "scientific morality" that would like to found a normative, albeit apparently libertarian, ethics based on knowledge. As we have perhaps already overstated, such a moralism preaches the foreclosure of the subject-as-model, provided that the uniformity of a transcendental ego is still cast there. The stated ethic betrays the leader who advocates it: the Good he professes, backed up with scientific proofs, denotes the teleology of the necessarily oppressive System.¹³⁴

By exploring the ethical as a textual practice, Kristeva displaces the formulation of ethics based on knowledge. As a practice that occurs prior to discovering knowledge, ethical reading does not foreclose a model of the subject or readily assume stability or social bond between the self and other formulated communal terms, is too often assumed to be synonymous with "textual practice," or rather the exploration of signs and their meanings beyond normative language. She notes this to be an oversight, wherein ethics and knowledge are normalized and become distant from engagement and analysis. If we do not continually question our ways of knowing, we restrict our communal capacity to question the covert ways in which embodied subjects are restricted and denied avenues of political speech and poetic expression--all too apparent in the interruption of Preciado's speech.

¹³⁴ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 234.

Conclusion

When I started my senior project, I was questioning the ways in which difficulty pervades in communicative knowledge. Questioning the manners in which understanding is protected by assuming its limits, the difficult writing I encountered appeared to resist the practice of readily foreclosing knowledge. I became curious about modes of reading and scholarship that considers meaning to not always be transparent or fully revealed. Studying literature and human rights, I found myself exploring the ways in which knowledge is constantly in the process of being discovered. Kafka's aphorism "Belief in progress doesn't mean belief in progress that has already occurred. That would not require belief," encapsulates the problem raised that should not be resolved.¹³⁵ Kafka's literature relies on the unpredictability of the future. His insistence upon movement, progress, and the unattainability of truth allow us to explore how contradictions are better left explored than resolved. Judith Butler's essay "Values of Difficulty," offers an example of what Kafka alludes to in his aphorism. She defends academic difficulty by exploring Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin's correspondences as they debate Benjamin's manuscript on Baudelaire. Both scholars studied materialism at the Institute of Social Research, but far more is at stake in the argument for Benjamin, who is waiting to escape Europe during World War II.¹³⁶ Adorno and the institute's rejection of Benjamin's writing questions the clarity and communicability of Benjamin's belief as proof of its falsity. His insistence upon exploring the particularities of Baudelaire's prose metaphorically and inconclusively---without recourse to the total social process---is a risk that could deter him from escaping collaborationist France.¹³⁷ Although he is writing to secure the publishing of his article and receive a visa from the institute

¹³⁵ Kafka, *Aphorisms*, 68.

¹³⁶ Butler, "Values of Difficulty," 209.

¹³⁷ Butler, "Values of Difficulty," 210.

in order to escape the war, his insistence upon the accuracy of his theory is of equal concern and will not be compromised. Rather than make “explicit the meaning of the disparate elements of analysis at hand,” he draws a distinction between his beliefs and the school.¹³⁸ Butler offers that “Benjamin suggests that theory must risk a certain incoherence, it must fail to be fully explicit, that it must founder on relations that might be figured, through metaphor, but not captured through conceptual elaboration.”¹³⁹ In his letter to Adorno, he writes: “I, too, regard this as a theory in the strictest sense of the word....this is the place and the only place in this part [of the text], where the theory comes to its own in undistorted fashion. It breaks like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber.”¹⁴⁰ Offering that his analysis, although allusive, is the clearest “undistorted” means of communicating the brevity of its object; in fact, it is the theory and its explanation. He adds “It is therefore a question of my own most productive interests as a writer. I will not deny that these may occasionally do violence to my original interests. There is an antagonism here of which I would not wish to be relieved, not even once in my dreams.”¹⁴¹ It is a belief in progress that has not occurred and we shall not be relieved of; a belief for the sake of progress. Benjamin does not attempt to foreclose the possibilities offered by the antagonisms--would rather do violence to himself than foreclose the opportunities of elucidating hidden knowledge within the text. Both Kafka and Benjamin’s insistence upon the value of incoherence in writing, highlight that progress can occur by allowing truth to remain unpredictable and unforeseeable.

¹³⁸ Butler, 210.

¹³⁹ Butler, 212.

¹⁴⁰ Butler, 212.

¹⁴¹ Butler, 213.

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