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Stanley Corngold: **Lambent Traces**

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Introduction

BEGINNINGS

“KAFKA IS NOT systematic, but he is coherent.”¹ Yet for all the progress made in cataloguing the stereotypes of Kafka’s social environment (sexual politics, family politics, ethnic politics, technics of script and the other media), the fundamental figures of his thought remain unsolved.

After more than a half-century of investigation, one would think, there ought to be an answer to the question, What, then, is Kafka’s argument? And yet a critic as incisive as Erich Heller, addressing the question of the meaning of *The Trial*, throws up his hands in the end, asking: “What is [K.’s] guilt? What is the Law?”² And, what, indeed, is Kafka’s Law? Here, as in everything in Kafka, it seems, in the words of Friedrich Hölderlin’s hero Hyperion, “an instant of reflection hurls us down.”³

I cannot say what *the* argument is, though I will discuss various constellations of images, tropes, narratives, aperçus, and aphorisms that resemble arguments. They are the exploding patterns of Kafka’s thought. Walter Benjamin saw Kafka’s work as a nebula of Kabbalah and Edington; Theodor Adorno, as a cryptogram of the waste products extruded by late capitalism on its way to fascism; Walter Sokel, as the expanded myths of “authority and the self”; Gerhard Kurz, as the product of drastic awakenings. More recently, in *Schriftverkehr* (textual intercourse), Gerhard Neumann and Wolf Kittler have uncovered the modern medial dimensions of Kafka’s stories of communication and failed communication.⁴ Within this giant, endlessly ramified complex, argument-like figures of thought readily emerge. But these sequences do not fit the patterns of lived experience of persons generally or the customary dialectical or deconstructive moves that inform contemporary analysis. Kafka’s “business,” it appears, like “our business,” according to Jean-François Lyotard, “is not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable.”⁵ The most important word is “allusions.”

Consider a text of Kafka’s, not chosen entirely at random, that illustrates the sort of conceptual difficulties I am envisioning. In spring 1922, in a notebook entry that is exceptionally clear and seemingly accessible to analysis, Kafka constructed one of the many parabolic houses that abound in his confessional writings. A building arises from his failure to write; or better, as he literally says,

Writing denies itself to me. Hence plan for autobiographical investigations. Not biography but investigation and detection of the smallest possible component parts. Out of these I will then construct myself, as one whose house is unsafe wants to build a safe one next to it, if possible out of the material of the old one. What is bad, admittedly, is if in the midst of building his strength gives out and now, instead of one house, unsafe but yet complete, he has one half-destroyed and one half-finished house, that is to say, nothing. (DF 350)

How intelligible this is. It is easy to understand what it might mean to live in a house that is unsafe, to want to build another, in doing so to want to justify even the elements of the first failed enterprise, to redeem them even, in proving them good enough to be reused. We understand, too, how one's strength might give out, and where would one be then? Neither at home in the first building nor the second, the first imperfect and yet complete, the second merely half-built: the builder is stranded between them. This is where the aphorism could end, and this is where we might reasonably conclude that here is a narrative intelligible on the grounds of its analogy with lived experience. But this is not where it ends. It continues:

What follows is madness, that is to say, something like a Cossack dance between the two houses, whereby the Cossack goes on scraping and throwing aside the earth with the heels [Absätze] of his boots until his grave is dug out under him. (DF 350, H 388)

The leap (it is swifter and less traceable than a leap) to another order of the imagination, where thought-in-images races, takes us out of a system of binary opposites—of “writing” versus “autobiographical investigations”—and out of a pattern of plausible reference to the building of a new house from the elements of the old. It takes us to another kind of literary intensity. The Cossack dance dances into the text, as text; the dance is without prototype in what has so far been given by the text and without fitting conclusion at an order of insight and reflection. The Cossack dance dances into the text as the very act of producing text. Protruding from the dancer's scraping boots are heels and, by association, pens—for *Absätze* means at once “heels” and “paragraphs”—while, quite consistently, Kafka's verb “scraping” (*scharren*) and the act of writing (*schreiben*) also share a root. This is to stress the art-character of the dance, the literal product of that “freedom of true description that releases one's foot from lived experience [Erlebnis]” (D1 100, GW 9:71).

Meanwhile, the qualifier “Cossack” adds another braided supplement

of meaning, invoking Kafka's history of relations to the "Russian" friend of "The Judgment"; to the Russian wastes in the diaries as a paradigm of indifference; and to the Russian killing agents of pogroms.⁶ In pointing to a cold climate, it gathers together all the associations that Sokel has noted in this "existential sign"—connotations of isolation, asceticism, fanaticism, exile.⁷ But that this Cossack dance as another sort of *writing* should finally dig one's own grave turns reason and worldly experience upside down. It is "madness," for writing in the normal case would raise one up out of the deathlike anonymity of unarticulated life. Writing may be an act of inscribing, as one implication of "scraping" has it, and may even represent, as Benjamin remarked, the death of an intention—the death, by degrees, of an empirical self—but it also surely amounts to a construction of sorts.

There are different types of writing here to look at. Recall how the passage began: the speaker has lost touch with "real" writing, which can only be real in the sense of transcending a merely empirical self, the creature of affects and stereotypes; and he has failed. So, barred from real writing, he seeks to write autobiography, a kind of writing that on the face of it is dedicated to building up and affirming the empirical person. But that too has failed and passed into another figurative action of writing that is unlike "real" writing because the death that this new dancing implies is more grievous than the figurative death of an empirical intention; and it is unlike autobiographical writing, because it does not construct a house for the ego (L 82). But if, in being unlike autobiographical writing, it is, as writing, more like real writing, then it does not only dig out a metaphorical grave; it constructs another sort of apparatus, contributing to the manufacture of Kafka's portable house of art. And if, in being unlike real writing, it is more like autobiographical writing, then certainly, it, too, has an ego-building dimension. So what, finally, is the relation of this *third* kind of writing—the enigmatic "construction of the grave"—to the house of art and the half-built house of the ego?

I do not think this narrative is, on the face of it, susceptible to a Hegelian—triadic, subsumptive—model of thought. And a deconstructionist model that stresses the eternally supplementary, delaying character of the third term—the Cossack dance that undoes the ostensible binary of the houses—understates the power of the third term to produce an entirely new sequence of truth claims even from the dreadful finality of the grave as well as on the heels of the cultural reference that digs it. Nonetheless, the passage began as a sequence of restricted arguments: "Writing denies itself to me. Hence plan for autobiographical investigations." Such sequences recur in even the most unpredictably image-saturated and argumentatively torqued of Kafka's stories. And, in

this case, some of this argument points to one or another of Kafka's strife-torn identity elements, elements of his chief predicament. Kafka's work, as Benjamin noted, "argues nothing but is so constituted that it can at any time be inserted in an argumentative context" (B 41).

In the two houses above, even half-built, one discerns a pattern, a genealogical reminiscence of the two houses into which Kafka was born, for he is the son of two fathers.⁸ He is the bourgeois flesh-and-blood of Herrmann Kafka, the entrepreneur and dealer in curses; and he is also someone else's son, the son of another father of whose family he is the "formal necessity" but who remains unknown.

He does not live for the sake of his personal life; he does not think for the sake of his personal thoughts. It seems to him that he lives and thinks under the compulsion of a family, which, it is true, is itself superabundant in life and thought, but for which he constitutes, in obedience to some law unknown to him, a formal necessity. Because of this unknown family and this unknown law he cannot be exempted. (GW 269)

Kafka's task is to reconstruct himself along the imaginary lines of this paternity. Readers acquainted with Benjamin's readings of Kafka may see in this formulation a domestic version of Benjamin's famous aphorism:

Kafka's work is an ellipse; its widely spaced focal points are defined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (which is, above all, the experience of tradition) and, on the other hand, by the experience of the modern city-dweller.⁹

This genealogical pattern has plain ramifications. If Kafka's father, the urban parvenu, is not his true father, then for one moment Kafka is fatherless, he is half-orphaned. He lives in another "country," a wilderness in which, separated from his parents, he is at once exile and orphan; he is a foreigner, an "American," in search of a new Zion.¹⁰ Yet at other times — times that are startling — Herrmann Kafka is also the valuable, the authentic instigator of the son's search for the other father — the father of the "second" son who, at the beginning of Kafka's intellectual and artistic career, is represented by the bachelor, the writer. Consider this remarkable sentence from "Letter to His Father": "My writing was all about you," wrote Kafka.

All I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast. It was an intentionally long-drawn-out leave-taking from you, only although *it was brought about by force on your part*, it did take its course in the direction determined by me. (emphasis added, DF 177)

Now lines of relation have been laid down that Kafka's stories can accommodate, in which a father may be loved as the source, ignored as the imposter, and hated as the usurper. The sequence is not logical ("systematic"), since it violates the law of the excluded middle, but it is coherent, in the sense of constituting a pattern. This makes at least one empirical feature of Kafka's stories immediately cogent: his propensity for twinning—viz. "I"/the Praying Man (in *Description of a Struggle*); "I"/You, the Bachelor (in "'You,' I Said . . ."); Georg Bendemann/the Russian friend (in "The Judgment"); Lieutenant Gregor Samsa/the monstrous vermin (in *The Metamorphosis*); Old Commandant/New Commandant (in "In the Penal Colony"); businessman/schoolmaster (in "The Village Schoolmaster"); jackals/Arabs (in "Jackals and Arabs"); K. the land surveyor and the life he left behind (in *The Castle*); and, in the same novel, K.'s indistinguishable apprentices, the two Friedas, and Sordini/Sortini. Perhaps the root disturbance in this doubling—the last example is vivid—is their difference precisely in the midst of so much resemblance—a sameness that emerges only as "marred" by difference, a difference that emerges only as marred by sameness.¹¹

If such distinctions sound abstruse, they are nonetheless productively played out in Kafka's novels, as par excellence, in the haunting repetitions of *The Trial* and *The Castle*. The endless resemblances of the Castle-world without qualities are full of a foreboding of danger. This world of doublings is prefigured by the sinister paintings in *The Trial* offered for sale to Joseph K. by the painter Titorelli:

"A landscape of the heath," said the painter, and handed K. the painting. It showed two frail trees, standing at a great distance from one another in the dark grass. . . . "Here's a companion piece to that picture," said the painter. It may have been intended as a companion piece, but not the slightest difference could be seen between it and the first one: here were the trees, here was the grass, and there the sunset. . . . "You seem to like the subject," said the painter, and pulled out a third painting, "luckily enough, I have a similar one right here." But it was not merely similar, however, it was exactly the same landscape. (T 163)

In the Castle-world the barren "heath" is covered in a snow eternally blanketing differences. The lower inhabitants are even less distinguishable from one another than Sordini and Sortini. When K. says that his place lies somewhere between the peasants and the Castle, the teacher objects, saying, "There is no difference between the peasants and the Castle" (C 9). Klamm's men, too, cannot be told apart at first sight. Confronting Arthur and Jeremiah, the assistants furnished by the Castle, K. is puzzled: "'This is difficult,' said K., comparing their faces as he

had often done before. ‘How am I supposed to distinguish between you? Only your names are different, otherwise you’re as alike . . . as snakes’” (C 18).

Such indistinction defines the architecture of the place. The village housing the Castle is a maze of ramshackle buildings. Even as a putative surveyor, K. cannot discern the village from the Castle, which is itself “only a rather miserable little town”; the snowed-in world allows for no distinctions of rank (C 8). Everywhere in the Castle-world lowers the presence of something not so much downtrodden as subhuman—pre-historical—visible in the faces of the peasants, their heads as if beaten flat under the weight of archaic authority. Here, the effect is of another sort of doubling: the sameness/difference pair operates to produce a sense of the contemporaneousness of the archaic and the modern—that fusion of aeons in Kafka originally noted by Benjamin.¹² The danger for the hero, the surveyor K., who appears to have wandered into the village at the same time that he claims his right to live there, is to founder in unknown dimensions of indistinction. There are

hours in which K. continually had the feeling that he was so deep in a foreign place as no man before him, a foreign place in which even the air had no ingredient of the air of home, in which one must suffocate on foreignness and in whose absurd allurements one could do nothing more than go further, go further astray. (C 41, translation modified)

Repetition and difference operate their effects even as abstractions. Reflecting on “The Judgment,” Kafka declared, not obviously with disapproval: “The story is full of abstractions. . . . The friend is hardly a real person, perhaps he is rather what father and son have in common” (LF 267). The factor that the father and the son finally have least in common, against all odds—I shall spring for this point—is the factor of paternity. The outcome of the entire complex of thought and action involved in Kafka’s writing “The Judgment” is not his paternity, which remains an abstraction throughout: he cannot give himself the name of father. In the moment of writing the conclusion of “The Judgment,” Kafka may have thought, as he declared to Max Brod, of “a strong ejaculation”;¹³ but when it came to reflecting on this story in one of the several diary entries that followed its composition, he said it came out of him “like a regular birth” (DI 278). A recent thesis on fatherhood helps to explain Kafka’s fascinated aversion to abstractions:

Fatherhood is a physical relation, but not enough of one—hence it needs to be constructed culturally, solidified institutionally, established by law, *becoming* the law. As the imposition of the abstract

on the material, it becomes the figure of abstraction itself, *the* abstraction that has constituted and organized civilization as we know it.¹⁴

Later in life the real father and the ideal father function as archrepresentatives—they are progenitors—of worlds that Kafka calls material and spiritual. But their distinction, especially in the matter of what is owed to them, is never finally separate. If it seems tautologically binding that life should be lived in devotion to the “spiritual” world, Kafka will also write, “In the struggle between yourself and the world, back the world” (literally, “be the world’s second”) (DF 39). This is another illustration of his insatiable penchant for undoing antithesis:

My repugnance for [antitheses] is certain. . . . They make for thoroughness, fullness, completeness, but only like a figure on the “wheel of life” [a toy with a revolving wheel]; we have chased our little idea around the circle. They are as undifferentiated as they are different. (D1 157)¹⁵

Quite in accord with Kafka’s horror of antitheses, Mark Anderson redeems the famous aporia in Kafka between the desire for writing, on the one hand, and family, on the other, in the reached treasure and solid joy of an imagined Zion.¹⁶ There is the Zion of the achieved written work, and then there is the Zion of political Palestine, which includes marriage:

It is as if the idea of Zionism were inseparable from the idea of marriage and founding a family. Both prospects represented to him the decisive step into a community, a living Jewish community. . . . To an anxious, literarily ambitious but unproductive Jewish writer plagued by bodily ills and what he thought was the malady of urban life, both Zionism and marriage within Judaism represented the threshold to a new, healthier, if frightening existence.

This “new and improved” existence does not exclude the practice of the writer’s profession (though one would wonder what shape it would take, flattened within a new social differential).¹⁷

Kafka’s horror of antithesis, like his penchant for doubling, is driven by a dominant myth of the two fathers. In *The Myth of Power and the Self*, Sokel refers the root of such doubling to Kafka’s “Gnostic sensibility,” his responsiveness to the proposition that being arises through an act of divine self-betrayal, a defection of God from himself.

What predisposes Kafka to this particular Gnostic perspective is not only the split in the self between two contradictory demands, each of absolute validity, but also the radical division in the source

of the law, the split in the father figures, power figures, and God figures of his life and work.¹⁸

The figure of the two fathers informs Kafka's imagination of Zion as the bliss of a self purified of division. The model for this bliss is therefore a sort of death, a death of the ego that is constituted by such apparently intractable divisions. Writing well, writing ecstatically, Kafka is relieved of this burden. After completing "The Judgment," he recorded "the fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing over water. Several times during this night I heaved my own weight on my back" (D1 276). It is in relation to such "self-consumption" (*Selbstaufzehrung*) that Kafka also conjures a redemptive death (DF 87, GW 6:198). "I would put myself in death's hands," he writes. "Remnant of a faith. Return to a father [zum Vater]. Great Day of Atonement [reconciliation, Versöhnung]" (D2 187, GW 11:167). The figure of this Zion, according to the translation of Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt, no mean interpreters of Kafka, is "a" father. I would choose "the" father, even if the definite article still leaves the identity of this father unspecified. What is so haunting is that Kafka casts the goal of self-dissolution, which implicates writing, along with an explicit Gnostic theology of world-refusal, as the journey to the right father.



With the citation of a Gnostic theology, an irregular doublet has emerged, involving the terms "Gnostic" and "gnostic." The "doctrine" of the two fathers is rooted in historical Gnosticism, but I have also said that Kafka's writerly élan is "gnostic"—i.e., neo-Gnostic. What is the meaning of this difference?

In the pages that follow, Gnosticism appears in an upper- and a lower-case version. Upper-case Gnosticism refers to systems of theological belief active in the Middle East around the second century A.D. until put down mercilessly by an endangered Catholic Church and by other orthodoxies—Persian and Jewish. Gnosticism views this world as the corrupt product not of the true god but of a demented demiurge;¹⁹ nevertheless, traces of the true world can be intuited by the live spirit in ecstasy. Sparks fly up. The task is purification—not personal augmentation and not reproduction.

Kafka had more than a passing acquaintance with the systematic theology of Gnosticism, including the "Gnostic edges of Kabbalah."²⁰ He owned Walther Köhler's *Die Gnosis*;²¹ in discussion circles at the salon

Haus Fanta, he heard lectures on a type of Gnosticism called Marcionism. William M. Johnston offers this vivid precis:

The gnosis that flourished at Prague between 1890 and 1930 resembled a Christian heresy known as Marcionism. Preaching in Anatolia and Rome, Marcion (ca. 85–ca. 155) had taught that the Creator God of the Jews was an evil demiurge, whose Creation had trapped men until Christ came to deliver them. Representing the supreme, benevolent God, Christ preached a Gospel of love which if heeded would abolish the tyranny imposed by a capricious creator. Marcion reprobated Jewish law, promising redemption after death from the despotism of the Creator. Hostility to law and yearning for a remote salvation characterize the Gnostics of Prague.²²

Sokel's *The Myth of Power and the Self*, which considers Kafka's Gnosticism in depth, objects to the premise of a Marcionist influence on Kafka precisely on account of its hostility to Jewish law.²³

Indeed, for all the glamor of this association of Kafka with Marcionism and other unusual theologies—Kabbalistic and Chinese—it is important to keep Johnston's proviso in mind: "Marcionism" was "similar to" the gnosis that flourished in Prague in Kafka's life; Kafka was at best similar to the "Gnostics of Prague"; and it is not trivially paradoxical to recall Kafka's own voiced concern, whether he was in any important way "similar to" himself.²⁴ This puts Kafka's writing at three removes from Marcionism. In a word, Kafka's Gnosticism is not Marcionist; pace Franz Kuna, Kafka did not "embrace" Marcionism.²⁵

On the other hand, this exclusion does not rule out the perspective that views a number of themes in Kafka's work as refractions of Marcionist law and lore.²⁶ The most interesting of these, as I have suggested, is the "doctrine of the two gods."²⁷ In *The Metamorphosis* we have Gregor Samsa's agonized surmise:

Truly, this was not the father he had imagined to himself. . . . And yet, and yet, could that be his father? . . . From under his bushy eyebrows his black eyes darted fresh and penetrating glances . . . [as he] advanced with a grim visage. (CS 120)

Here, it is worth noting, the Marcionist dualism is "estranged." For if the father who appears to his verminous son Samsa is "higher" than the invalid that Gregor had imagined, in Ireneaus's account of Marcionism it is precisely the "lower" of the contrasted gods who is warlike, concupiscent, and inconstant.²⁸ Granting that Kafka's relation to his reading is allusive and metamorphic, we could still find traces here of the Marcionist and other Gnostic gods at work. This is the view of Gerhard

Kurz, author of an incisive monograph on Kafka's death drive. "Kafka's literature of existence," he writes,

speaks of border skirmishes between life and death — of anxiety, the experience of death, guilt, and suffering. Its recurrent metaphorical paradigms are . . . homelessness, the loss of orientation, impotence, "thrownness," exposure, vulnerability, anxiety, madness, sickness, imprisonment, alienation. All are metaphors of Gnostic origin.²⁹

This origin evidently includes more than the principle of the evil creator. Clark Emery, a Blake scholar, has assembled a list of "characteristics considered normative for all Gnostic teachers and groups in the era of classical Gnosticism":³⁰

The Gnostics posited an original spiritual unity that came to be split into a plurality. As a result of this precosmic division the universe was created. It was created by a leader possessing inferior spiritual powers, a leader often having the appearance of the Old Testament Jehovah. A female emanation of God was involved in the cosmic creation.

In the cosmos, space and time have a malevolently spiritual character and may be personified as demonic beings separating man from God. For man, the universe is a vast prison. He is enslaved both by the physical laws of nature and by such psychic laws as the Mosaic code. Mankind may be personified as Adam, who lies in the deep sleep of ignorance, his powers of spiritual self-awareness stupefied by materiality. However, within each natural man is an "inner man," a fallen spark of the divine substance.

Since, within each man a spark of holiness exists, the possibility of an awakening from the present stupefaction exists. What effects the awakening is not obedience, not faith, not good works, but knowledge.

Before the awakening, men undergo troubled dreams. The knowledge that awakens man from these dreams is not arrived at by cognition but through revelatory experience, and it is not an accession of information but a modification of the sensate being. The awakening (that is, the salvation) of any individual is a cosmic event. Since the whole universal effort is to restore the wholeness and unity of the godhead, active rebellion against the moral law of the Old Testament is enjoined upon every man.³¹

Some of these themes survive in Kafka, but few of them serve him as principles. It is true that for Kafka "the knowledge that awakens man from these [troubled] dreams is not arrived at by cognition but through revelatory experience" — it happens in the act of reckless writing.

And certainly, this knowledge is “not an accession of information.”³² On the other hand, there is little else of normative Gnosticism literally present in Kafka’s writings, and much of it is altogether alien to him—viz. God’s “female emanation” and “active rebellion against the moral law.” But since several Gnostic characteristics have a haunting relevance to Kafka’s wider concerns, they can be termed a Gnosticism suited to a reading of his work.

Gnostic elements permeate Kafka’s writing; but because they do not supersaturate it, his writing is *tout dit* a lower-case gnosticism, importantly including mythic elements of his own devising. “I must create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s,” wrote another heterodox Gnostic William Blake.³³ Small “g” gnosticism is a descriptor of Kafka’s experience of writing; as a *writer* he is a “Gnostic sort” of writer; his “writerly being” (*Schriftstellersein*) has a Gnostic character (Br 383). This is a type that I shall serially elaborate in the lower-case: it includes the writer’s ecstasy and a sense of bodily detachment; writing as a consuming of or leaping off “experience”; and a vast, autonomous world of inspirations conveying the promise of a higher perception (D2 212).³⁴

The key point remains that for all of Kafka’s arcane learning, normative Gnosticism could never serve him as a *philosophy of composition*. There is a world of conceptual difference between a Gnosticism that perceives the beginning of wisdom in the wish to die and a gnosticism that allows for ecstasy in the act of writing and constitutes a moral justification for a life lived here and now in writing.

At certain times in his life, Kafka did experiment more seriously than at other times with normative Gnostic thinking. This is true especially for the years after 1917, when the diagnosis of his tuberculosis extinguished the extravagant hopes he harbored about living a life as a professional writer independent of his family, outside Prague. Now he turns to Gnosticism as a stay against a senseless death. At the same time it is no accident—it is utterly crucial—that these years 1917–1918, in which he devoted himself to thinking the Gnosis, were years in which he wrote next to nothing. His illness, which conjured his real death, constitutes a muted syncope, a hiatus in principle, between his gnosticism and his Gnosticism. The stories toward the end of his life (see chapter 6) are thereafter penetrated by formal elements consistent with Gnosticism: Kafka is all too conscious of a death that exceeds, alas, the “little death” of the writing ecstasy.

The distinction between the Gnostic versus the gnostic component in any given work of Kafka, however, cannot be prescribed in advance: like the terms writing and death, they mingle, separate, and return. In one sense the gnosticism of writing is consistent with most Gnosticisms: it stands in the way of paternity, it is a stay against paternity, it is con-

sistent with Gnosticism's repudiation of this-worldly carnal existence. In another sense, such gnosticism is not a self-denying spiritual exercise. From the beginning Kafka means to write books good enough to be published and in this way secure a certain cultural immortality. One hears of Kafka's belief in writing as belief itself. In this sense he is this-worldly, he is not a Gnostic, and the time of Gnostic thought experimentation is an articulation and heightening of concerns that have always been present in his life as a writer.³⁵

If Kafka is, generally speaking, a religious thinker, he is, as Ritchie Robertson puts it,

a highly individual and challenging religious thinker. His thought does not proceed within the framework of any one religion, but defines itself against a number of theologies and philosophies. . . . One simplifies Kafka and denies his originality and his eclecticism if one locates his thought within any religious system.³⁶

What this comes down to, for Kafka, is a remarkably intense attachment to writing—to its promise of a bliss of justification that includes a measure of cultural immortality—and, on the other hand, an aversion to life, a poorly suppressed longing to die.



We began this chapter by weaving a web to contain Kafka, but the web was attached to only one piece of one small text, the text of the Cossack dance. As a result, it was incomplete from the start. Will it come round at the end of (hermeneutic) time to the remainder of the aphorism?

In the meantime, a time of great patience, it will be useful to study the sources of Kafka's first great story, "The Judgment." "The Judgment," a struggle between father and son, is not least of all a decisive anchoring term in the Gnostic pattern of two fathers and the gnostic pattern of the writer's ecstasy and the writer's death. Anderson suggests that

the search of so many of Kafka's characters for the Law, for a home, for artistic fulfillment, can be read metaphorically as a figure for Kafka's own search to reproduce the conditions and results of this single night in September 1912 when he wrote "The Judgment."³⁷

It was the ecstasy of writing this story—and such premonitions as Kafka had before, while writing—that very likely prompted him in turn to study Gnostic mysticisms.³⁸