

KAFKA AND THE MINISTRY OF WRITING

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For everything comes from the castle.
—Kafka, *The Castle*

Toward the end of his life, in a tormented letter to his friend and editor Max Brod, Kafka described his writing as the product of a state of being, for which he coined the expression “Schriftstellersein” (“the being of a writer”) (Br 384, L 333). The sense of this term unfolds from the word *sein*, which means, as Kafka wrote, “being” and also “belonging to him.”¹ Kafka felt *possessed* by the being that craved to write.

This deeply rooted second nature could never become a familiar presence. It haunted Kafka as a possibility of his actual person—an inherent strangeness, stirring longing and anxiety. To come to grips with this strangeness was to come to grips with the writer in him, but what would it mean to “come to grips” with writing when writing is a “monstrosity”?

What is it about? What is that—literature? Where does it come from? What use is it? What questionable things! Add to this questionableness the further questionableness of what you say [about it], and a monstrosity [*ein Ungeheuer*] arises. (A loose page from Kafka’s notebooks, October/November 1922, KSS 212)²

To “deal” with this monstrosity would be to cope with the mandate that it laid on him—to write well at some unheard-of degree of proficiency or else be lost. “I can still get fleeting satisfaction from works like ‘Country Doctor,’” he wrote in 1917. “But happiness only in case I can raise the world into purity, truth, immutability” (KSS 205). The stakes were as serious from the very beginning. In 1903, when he was twenty, Kafka wrote to his friend Oskar Pollak, “God doesn’t want me to write, but I—I must” (L 10). To write is to consent to a pact more than merely monstrous, for this antiself—literature—can also figure as

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a stranger-god, an opponent god. To be bent on writing is to consent to “service to the devil” (KSS 211). Kafka rarely wavered as to the gravity of his mission, describing himself, in 1922, toward the end of his life, as

a son incapable of marriage, who produces no carriers of the name; pensioned at 39; occupied only with an eccentric writing that aims at nothing else than the salvation or damnation of his own soul. (KSS 212)

Justifying this relation and its costs defined Kafka’s sense of the ethical life.

The lure of this otherness, *Schriftstellersein*, literary being, is constitutive for Kafka: “I have no literary interests; something else: I am made of [*bestehe aus*] literature” (LF 304, BrF 444), but there is no constancy to this *Bestand*—this stock: Kafka’s sense of it is complex and changing.

It is easier to say how it cannot be understood. It cannot be conceived of in relation to one sort of self-identical entity called the empirical ego, for, as Kafka writes, “What do I have in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself. . . .” (D1 11). Nor can it be conceived of in relation to a stable, self-identical otherness that could figure as the object of intellectual curiosity. For this other term “insists” in the empirical subject, though not as a guest. As an *Ungeheuer* (a monster), it is literally “infamiliaris,” having no place at the family hearth. It is inside as a thing forever out(sid)ing him, exposing him as a subject while it remains inconsistent with itself, a fact that its monstrosity suggests. The writing self has *various* agencies, *various* “departments,” *various* laws.³ In Kafka’s late epic *The Castle*, the figure of Klammer, the pilgrim-hero’s target bureaucrat, is never seen as self-identical:

They say he looks completely different when he comes into the village and different when he leaves it, different before he has had a beer, different afterwards, different awake, different asleep, different alone, different in a conversation, and, quite understandably after all this, almost utterly different up there at the castle. (C 176)

Klammer is the allegory of such instability.

Kafka’s sense of strangeness to self is continuously displayed in various fictional appearances—in the bachelor; “the Russian friend” of *The Judgment*; the unholy, monstrous insect body; an outlandish homeland, America; the court; the burrow; “the false hands” that led him astray; the “spirits” that twist his words (KSS 212f). What threads these modalities together is the “eccentricity” of the writer’s being.⁴ The trajectory of Kafka’s works is a history of approaches, more or less effective, to the elusive otherness of writing.

In this book about Kafka's work as a lawyer and bureaucrat, we are concerned with the way in which Kafka's sense of his fate as a writer is implicated in his work life—the way in which his *Beamtensein*, his “official” being, is involved in his *Schriftstellersein*, his writerly being. At first glance, this association could seem a poor idea—as an adversary relation, yes, but scarcely a fraternal one or one based on resemblance. The comparison suggests a demeaning of writing by its likeness to work that is merely rulebound, calling for ordinary skills of application when not inspired by a philistine detestation of intelligence.⁵ And indeed, thinking so would tally with many of Kafka's complaints in his letters to his fiancée Felice Bauer and elsewhere.⁶ In 1912 he wrote in his diary, “My development is now complete and, so far as I can see, there is nothing left to sacrifice; I need only throw my work in the office out of this complex in order to begin my real life” (D1 211). And yet we propose to see Kafka's fiction, and most especially his *Castle* novel, as moving toward the reconciliation of these separate activities.

A certain reconciliation is already in play in Kafka's choice of the term *Schriftstellersein* over the other words available to him: *Dichtersein* or *Autorsein*. It is quite in line with modern professional life that Kafka chooses a word whose general connotations—and certainly its etymology—lend it a disenchanting, merely technical flavor. He is not a “poet” and not an “author,” both of which names are laden with an archaic, untimely authority (the poet) or autonomy (the author). The *Schriftsteller* is one who is assigned the function of setting down script in producing “literature.”

We intend to show that Kafka's legal and publicistic activity shares a *mode of being* with his fictional activity, allowing him to represent the destiny of a writer in the metaphor of bureaucratic social organization. Since this figure of bureaucracy is consistent in shape and aura with the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia, we may, as a result, relate quite concrete skeins of thought and imagery from Kafka's legal briefs and articles to his writer's notebooks. Here we are approaching the otherness of Kafka's fictional writing through one quite particular set of Kafka's texts—the “official” set. It is a little like following the tracks that Kafka's “vice-exister,” the pilgrim K, takes to the castle, which is rightly seen as a representative of the being of the writer.⁷

This attempt to enter into relation with this otherness-to-self is a solicitation of “authenticity,” a word (*authentisch*) that Kafka uses in such contexts. This approach is the recurrent motive of his work. This “plot” is found at the beginning and at the end—a career that might be defined by the markers “‘You,’ I said . . .,” a text of 1910, and *The Castle* of 1922.

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“‘You,’ I said . . .” is a “story” collated by Max Brod, Kafka’s editor and friend, from early diary fragments written at the time of the composition of *Description of a Struggle*. Here, a striver, a would-be bourgeois, describes his attempt to enter into personal relation with a monstrous other called, at various times, “the bachelor” (KSS 193, D1 24), “no better than some sort of vermin” (D1 23). The strangeness of this creature is pronounced: “Whether I lie here in the gutter and stow away the rainwater or drink champagne with the same lips up there under the chandelier makes no difference to me” (D1 23). In a powerful aria spoken by the “I,” whose voice, at the end, coalesces with that of the bachelor:

The bachelor has nothing ahead of him and therefore nothing behind him either. In the moment there is no difference, but the bachelor has only the moment. At that time—which no one can know today, for nothing can be so annihilated as that time—at that time he missed the mark when he constantly felt the ground of his being, the way one suddenly notices an ulcer on one’s body that until that moment was the slightest thing on one’s body—yes, less than the slightest, for it did not even seem to exist, and now it is more than everything else that our body has possessed since birth. If until this time our entire being was directed to the work of our hands, to whatever was seen by our eyes, heard by our ears, down to the steps of our feet, now we suddenly turn completely in the opposite direction, like a weathervane in the mountains. Now, instead of having run away at that moment, even in this latter direction—for only running away could have kept him on the tips of his toes, and only the tips of his toes could have kept him on the earth—instead of that, he lay down, as children now and then lie down in the snow in winter so as to freeze to death. (KSS 193–94)

This passage is remarkable: no details of milieu are given; no distinctions as to what went before or after “that time.” An “I”-and-“he” story suddenly becomes a “we” story, involving “our entire being.” What remains of a seemingly realistic narrative is only the bare bones of an idea, a structure of relationships. The bachelor has been given the exceptional opportunity of making contact with his depth, his basis (*Grund*); he can realize or fail to realize what Heidegger calls “the existential possibilities of a *Befindlichkeit*,” a moodfully attuned state of mind.⁸ The moment occurs as a scene of primal energy—a re-orientation away from the world of perception, of experience, toward what could very well be the space-time of a burgeoning literary imagination. It would seem desirable in principle to make contact with one’s basis so as to take the direction opened up by it. But the bachelor misses his chance; his “ulcer” forecasts the deformation of his opportunity.

The outcome is his ruin: the bachelor “misses the mark” by dint of “lying down.” (Throughout his notebooks, Kafka scatters such myths about the origin of his writing that invariably place a negative mark on it: the movement proceeding from the origin is contaminated by a wrong motive or another’s hostility, forcing the narrator to err, to turn away).

This creature who has failed to secure his “basis” figures in Kafka’s early mythology of literature as a deficient mode of the writer. He is marked by a “Russian” coldness, a Russian “indifference” (D2 115)—attributes that we can begin to project toward the world of *The Castle*. The bachelor is present at the scene of the birth of a literary destiny (“we suddenly turn completely in the opposite direction”) but misses this turning. And now, what amounts to a second turning takes the story onto an eccentric path. It narrates a reorientation toward a quite different dimension—that of the *higher social organization*. The new goal of the narrator is to join a society, a *Gesellschaft*, that promises a critical “organization” (*Organisierung*) of his powers—a “society” that I will mark now as the protobureaucratic social institution figuring as an object of desire:⁹

Certainly, I stood here obstinately in front of the house but just as obstinately I hesitated to go up . . . [D1 61]. I want to leave, want to mount the steps, if necessary, by turning somersaults. From that company [*Gesellschaft*] I promise myself everything that I lack, the organization of my powers, above all, for which the sort of intensification [critical heightening: *Zuspitzung*] that is the only possibility for this bachelor on the street is insufficient. (D1 24)

Here we can again look ahead to the figure of *The Castle*’s K, who contains both these clusters of identity elements; he is the provincial, bent on acquiring possessions—a wife, a home; and he is also the frozen bachelor, cuckolded almost immediately. He too promises himself that the Castle society will provide everything he lacks, above all, the organization of his powers.¹⁰ The bachelor’s failure to run in the direction opened to him, which I have taken to represent the poetic imagination, reappears in his bourgeois double as *his* lack, requiring a fulfillment that only a “society” can supply.

The bourgeois speaker looks for refuge from the horror conveyed by “the bachelor,” “some sort of a vermin,” by seeking entry into a “society” lodged in a grand house among whom, one can suppose, there are high officials of a ministry in a light, celebratory mood. We encounter such persons in *The Castle*—in the figure of Momus, for one, Klamm’s village secretary, “a young gentleman, extremely good-looking, pale and reddish, but very serious” (C 104), who radiates a

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ministerial smoothness, and, above all, in K's dream of conquest from the depths of his sleep at Bürgel's bedside when "it seemed to him as though . . . he had achieved a great victory and a society or party of persons (*Gesellschaft*) was already there to celebrate it and he or someone else was raising a champagne glass in honor of the victory" (C 264). Because, in "'You,' I said . . .," the speaker has the extraordinary idea that such a group will heighten and organize his talents and faculties, we must attribute to this society an unusual measure of interpersonal power, in which light it amounts to a *political* agency, if by "political" we understand institutions that, by appealing to custom and law, wear a mask of interpersonal concern, with the aim of producing, storing, and transmitting power. Crucially, however, this narrator does not go up these stairs; along with the bachelor he "freezes." So one will feel the element of menace in this higher society too: the little town palazzo rays out in equal measure both fascination and rejection. In this fragment of Kafka's deepest imagination, the figures of (1) writerly being and (2) participation in a social-political organization are brother phantasms of fear and desire, tangled together at the beginning in a poetological dream navel. At the outset of Kafka's writing career, we find the deep mutual involvement of the radically solitary, monstrous other and the sought-after protobureaucratic ministry as figures of writing.¹¹ And indeed, we might push back this entanglement to the earliest days, to the letter that Kafka wrote, at age twenty, to Oskar Pollak, because there the full context of Kafka's ambition reads:

God does not want me to write—but I, I must. And so it is an eternal up and down, in the end God is the stronger party. . . . There are so many powers in me tied to a post, which might perhaps become a green tree while they are liberated and become useful to me and *to the state*. (L10, emphasis added)



In the matter of bureaucracy, Kafka may be said to know on his living body those factors profiled in part 3, chapter 6, of Max Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Economy and Society). "The management of the modern office," writes Weber,

is based upon written documents ("the files"), which are preserved in their original or draught form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a "public" office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the

files, make up a “bureau.” In private enterprise, “the bureau” is often called the “office”. . . .¹²

In modern capitalist society, the institution of the office, for Weber and most decisively for Kafka, is ubiquitous and uncanny, “the admired adversary, spreading inexorably into every department of life.”¹³ We are at a stage, as Cornelius Castoriadis notes, where “bureaucratization (i.e. the management of activity by hierarchized apparatuses) becomes the very logic of society, its response to everything.”¹⁴ The omnipresence of files arises from a continuous amassing of data—rules, procedures, matters of fact—in the service of instrumental logic. But the cold rationality of its procedure is a mask, a trope that Kafka the artist was among the first to see and exploit. On the face of it, the bureaucratic principle leaves no place, in Weber’s scheme, for charisma. For him, as John Guillory observes, “Truly bureaucratic authority dissolves charisma and replaces it with a cathexis of the office rather than the person.” Thus Weber:

It is decisive for the specific nature of modern loyalty to an office that, in its pure type, it does not establish a relationship to a person, like the vassal’s or disciple’s faith in feudal or patrimonial relations of authority. Modern loyalty is devoted to impersonal and functional purposes.¹⁵

But here Weber misses the reality of affect and interest at work in the hierarchies of power, failing to account for the “affective attachment to superior *officeholders*.” The superior is never in fact anonymous or impersonal; the affect that binds one to the office cannot be readily distinguished from the affect that binds one to the officeholder.¹⁶

Guillory’s analysis of the two faces of bureaucracy is perfectly apt to Kafka’s relation to his *other* office. Features of the personal and impersonal faces of bureaucracy are indistinguishable from the masks of “writerly being.” On the impersonality of his “office cathexis,” we recall Kafka’s description of his fate as a writer:

There is nothing to me that . . . one could call superfluous, superfluous in the sense of overflowing. If there is a higher power that wishes to use me, or does use me, then I am at its mercy, if no more than as a well-prepared instrument. If not, I am nothing, and will suddenly be abandoned in a dreadful void. (LF 21)

This early picture of Kafka’s writing destiny consorts with the impersonal face of bureaucracy. But his office machine is also animate and charismatically charged. In an extraordinary letter to Milena Jesenská at the end of his life, Kafka describes the office as “a living human being, who looks at me . . . with its innocent eyes . . . a being with

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whom I have been united in a manner unknown to me” all the while it remains “alien.”¹⁷ The office Kafka is speaking of here is the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute for the Czech Lands in Prague! And what agency, one might ask, is Kafka speaking of when he writes of “the false hands that reach out to you in the midst of writing”?¹⁸ These are not the demons of the bureau but archons employed by the “office” of literature: here Kafka is referring to the nightly combat that writing forced on him. Conversely, during the day, he dealt with legal objects (business) who would have considered Dr. Franz Kafka, the adversarial institute lawyer, as precisely one of these wicked archons.

The sociologist Claude Lefort has explored Marx’s insight that bureaucracy is capable of translating “all social relations into a diction of formal relations between offices and ranks.”¹⁹ Kafka was the skilled bureaucrat able to translate into such diction his relation to the alien god of writing. Lefort points up the absurdity that this “translation” betrays: “Behind the mask of rules and impersonal relations lies the proliferation of unproductive functions, the play of personal contacts and the madness of authority.”²⁰ This is the ludic function drawn out in Kafka’s fiction but by no means absent from his bureaucratic life. Hartmut Binder identifies the ludic dimension in Kafka’s daily practice: “He could play with considerable success on the apparatus of ‘instances.’”²¹ How poorly, then, is Kafka’s relation to bureaucracy captured in the standard view that the aim of his fictional representation of bureaucracy is to pillory its crimes against the hapless supplicant.

Given the two faces of bureaucracy evenly profiled, Kafka’s fiction turns bureaucracy into a political grotesque—a grotesquerie that is “abysmally” comic.²² We have this rather cheerful account in Joseph Vogl’s essay on Kafka’s “political comedy”:

From the terror of secret scenes of torture to childish officials, from the filth of the bureaucratic order to atavistic rituals of power runs a track of comedy that forever indicates the absence of reason, the element of the arbitrary in the execution of power and rule. However, this element of the grotesque does not merely unmask and denounce. It refers—as Foucault once pointed out—to the inevitability, the inescapability of precisely the grotesque, ridiculous, loony, or abject sides of power. Kafka’s “political grotesque” displays an unsystematic arbitrariness, which belongs to the functions of the apparatus itself. There is really no real reason why [in *The Trial*] an exhausted court official at the end of the working day should occupy himself for an hour with tossing lawyers down the stairs. . . . Kafka’s

comedy turns against a diagnosis of the modernization of political power as a “rationalization process.”²³

Vogl refers to the Court bureaucracy in *The Trial*; Kafka’s *Castle* is even richer in comic-grotesque effects. The world of the castle is marked by a traffic in script that circles around higher authority at an immeasurable distance. Precisely this *Spielraum* encourages mad play in both the writer and his persona, K. In the anonymity of the office, the official in the castle world descends into a dreamlike trance of writing, sending, sorting, and storing messages as opportunities to exert power. Although these messages may concern matters on which he has no overview, he belabors them as an arm of the authority he does not know. Words in such hands take on demonically uncertain proportions, and they can be performatives that coerce subaltern behaviors in men and women. They can and do produce powerful literary effects.

In another section of part 3 chapter 6 of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Weber writes:

In principle, the modern organization of the civil service separates the bureau from the private domicile of the official, and, in general, bureaucracy segregates official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life.²⁴

This point, however, is problematic for Kafka. In general, for him, family has at least a family relation to the larger social-political organization Kafka calls *the office* and which, under the conditions of modernity, displays the features of bureaucracy. Paramount here is the splendid formulation:

He does not live for his personal life; he does not think for his personal thoughts. It seems to him that he lives and thinks under the compulsion of a family, which is surely itself overabundant in the power of life and thought, but for which he signifies, in accordance with some law unknown to him, a formal necessity. [For this unknown family and these unknown laws, he cannot be released (dismissed, *entlassen*).] (KSS 207)

The semantic variant “dismissed”—along with other terms belonging to the lexicon of modern political organization, viz. compulsion, law, formal necessity, and, perhaps, thought—suggests the *official* character of this family.

Kafka’s sense of the “normal” connection of family with higher organization is further spelled out in his exquisite account of relationships within the family, via Jonathan Swift, whom Kafka explicitly identifies:

The family, then, is an organism, but an extremely complex and unbalanced one, and like every organism it continually strives for equilibrium. . . .

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In humanity every individual has his place or at least the possibility of being destroyed in his own fashion. In the family, clutched in the tight embrace of the parents, there is room only for certain kinds of people who conform to certain kinds of requirements and moreover have to meet the deadlines dictated by the parents. If they do not conform, they are not expelled—that would be very fine, but it is impossible, for we are dealing with an organism here—but accursed or consumed or both. The consuming does not take place on the physical plane, as in the archetype of Greek mythology (Kronos, the most honest of fathers, who devoured his sons; but perhaps Kronos preferred this to the usual methods out of pity for his children). (L 294–95)

Note that each member of the organism has his super- or subordinate place and that the actions of the parents can be readily attributed to the top official of a bureaucratic organization: like him, they “dictate deadlines.” Compare this picture with Bürgel’s comment in *The Castle* that speaks of the castle as “a great living organization” (C 267). This remark tends to confirm K’s observation in a particular case: “Nowhere else had K ever seen one’s office and one’s life so intertwined as they were here, so intertwined that it sometimes seemed as though office and life had changed places” (C 58).

The special horror of chapter 2 of *The Metamorphosis*, in which Herr Samsa hurls into the verminous body of the “writerly” son the hurtful pieces of family language that are very likely the allusive sense of the small, hard apples he has stored in his pockets, is not trivially owed to the uncanny mingling of his official authority—for he sports the uniform of the bank employee—with his authority as family father (M 28–29).²⁵

In undoing the distinction between family life and bureaucracy, Kafka’s account radicalizes Weber’s. Kafka’s vision marks a departure from Weber—and a huge prophetic advance. For Kafka, the spirit of an ever-spreading bureaucracy is the circulation of ultimately unintelligible script of one sort or another, whether office or family language (as, for example, “In the next room . . . they are talking about vermin” “[KSS 196]).²⁶ He has forecast the multiplication of the opportunities for unintelligibility in what is called the media.



Some books act like a key
to strange rooms in one’s own castle. (L 10)

There is a wonderful precedent in the English literary canon for the poetic imagination that conceives of its activity as administered by an

office. It is found at the beginning of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1805), a work exemplary within an English Romantic tradition not unknown to Kafka.²⁷ The example I have in mind turns on the term *ministry*—a word found in book 1, where it compresses a doublet of ideas: it defines poetic existence as a passionate reading of signs and connects it, in a certain atmosphere of anxiety, to a powerful social-political agency—indeed, considers poetic existence literally as cooperation with this social-political agency. The narrator addresses

Ye Presences of Nature in the sky
And on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills!
And Souls of lonely places! can I think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry, when ye, through many a year
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
Impressed, upon all forms, the characters
Of danger or desire; and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth,
With triumph and delight, with hope and fear,
Work like a sea?²⁸

Note the fragments of the discourse of work and employment even in this pristine natural scene of reading. Here the word “ministry” chiefly adverts to the idea of precapitalist agencies benevolently—but also threateningly—“administering” lessons through signs made manifest by the cooperation of psychic “faculties.” In his 1943 novel *The Ministry of Fear*, Graham Greene restores to Wordsworth's “ministry” its menacing, bureaucratic sense; this antipoem, like Kafka's *The Trial*, concerns a hunted man pursued by shadowy killers. Vogl's discussion of Kafka's political grotesque is apt to Wordsworth here: Kafka's work is “less a disenchantment of the world than a bureaucratization of the heavens.”²⁹

The main feature of Wordsworth's Nature, in one important respect not unlike the world of *The Castle*, is its profusion of signs (“characters of danger or desire”) offering themselves to interpretation. My late colleague Charles Bernheimer discussed this dimension of the castle world with great finesse.³⁰ The difference between the relation of ministry and sign in *The Prelude* and in *The Castle* illuminates this latter world. Bernheimer begins with Kafka's great parable:

Everything submitted to him for the construction. Foreign workers brought the marble stones trimmed and fitted to one another. The stones lifted and placed themselves according to the measuring movements of his fingers. No construction ever came into being as easily as did this

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temple—or rather, this temple came into being in true temple-fashion. Except that on every stone—from what quarry had they come?—was scratched, with instruments obviously of a marvelous sharpness, the clumsy scribbings of senseless child-hands, or rather the inscriptions [better: entries, *Eintragungen*] of barbaric mountain dwellers, in order to spite, or to desecrate, or to destroy completely, for an eternity outlasting the temple. (DF 205)

The “ministry” of such “Presences” is barbaric—not benevolent—seemingly archaic but, from the standpoint of the “aeon,” uncannily modern: like *Schreibtischmörder*, bureaucrats who issue death notices from their desks (the castle presences are more nearly aggressive philanderers), they, too, do not fail to accompany their violence with “entries”: *Eintragungen*. The standard translation “inscriptions” misses the crucial bureaucratic nuance. At the inside of the mask of the barbarian is the official sworn to duty.

Bernheimer’s master text, throughout his discussion of the castle world of fleeting signs, is Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. In its light, Bernheimer identifies, with reference to the castle world, a profusion of signs in circulation, signs of and among ruins, signs that represent only things that have become irretrievable.

K is a land-surveyor in a quicksand of shifting signs. The castle refuses to confront him on his own terms, refuses to be conjured into presence. [Cf. Wordsworth’s “Presences,” SC]. Instead it insists on the purely allusive nature of its textuality. [Such] allegorical sign-scripts or script-images do not solicit belief: they solicit contemplation and interpretation.³¹

And yet such a thing as victorious interpretation can hardly be imagined *actualiter*, since there remains always the dizzying task of distinguishing “official meaning” from “private meaning” (which is anything but negligible). Indeed, it is “usually greater than any official meaning could ever be” (C 73). Nonetheless, K pursues a sense of “victory” by attempting to grasp the intentions of the castle toward him. We saw this desire for hermeneutic mastery in “‘You,’ I said . . .” when the narrator addresses the bachelor’s writing self: “If only I knew for certain that you were being truthful [*aufrechtig*] with me” (D1 24). Cognitive mastery (by the “well-prepared instrument”) might be one approach to the otherness (“a higher power that wishes to use me”), whose deep sense is literature. But this relation is more than an affair of correct interpretation; it is a practical matter, involving an entire reorientation. Recall from “‘You,’ I said . . .”:

If until this time our entire being was directed to the work of our hands, to whatever was seen by our eyes, heard by our ears, down to the steps of our

feet, now we suddenly turn completely in the opposite direction, like a weathervane in the mountains. (KSS 194)

The final reference of cognitive mastery is an action, a “turning” that Kafka must make into his text “in order,” while wearing the mask of K, “to keep himself upright in this [castle] world” (Cf. DI 26).

K’s concerns in *The Castle* may be taken as an essential refraction of Kafka’s concerns—even, and especially, K’s ruthless side. At times, K appears as an aggressive, worldly agent, an unscrupulous manipulator of persons, but then, after all, the stake for Kafka is similarly great in his resistance to “the spirits” (KSS 212), to “the false hands that reach out to you in the midst of writing.”³² If we conceive of K’s relentless march toward the castle as a reflection of Kafka’s relentless march toward *The Castle*—that is, as the writer’s relentless search for entry into his work, proceeding ruthlessly, as is his wont, since “sometimes in his arrogance, he is more afraid for the world than for himself” (KSS 206–7)—then K’s raw directness precisely characterizes Kafka’s drive. As K forcibly seeks to find his way aright in this castle world, so Kafka forcibly seeks to find himself aright in the castle world of his imagining.³³

And yet we see K pursuing “victory” through correct cognition—a matter of what one can *know* of the other and not how one must *act* toward the other. His choice of an assumed profession projects success along these lines, relating to this foreign construction—the castle—as its *Landvermesser*, a word that means “land surveyor.” Professionally armed, as a delineator of boundaries, K means to take the measure of his adversary. But the title he gives himself also suggests conceptual activity gone awry: “Landvermesser” can also mean “materialist *mis*-measurer.”

Since the castle to which K seeks entry by acts of conceptual mastery is humanly inhabited, the relation of knower to known is inevitably cast in the imagery of interpersonal *acknowledgment*. Where the act of knowing is successful, the knower is *acknowledged* by the known: “entry” is an affair of reciprocal recognition.

Here is K at the outset, aggressively pursuing his goal of entry. The first note is menacing.

So the castle had appointed him land surveyor. On the one hand, this was unfavorable, for it showed that the castle had all necessary information about him, had assessed the opposing forces, and was taking up the struggle with a smile. (C 5)

In terms of the metaphor of cognition, we have the failure of the pitifully human truth seeker on approximately this Faustian model: All you know of the object is what you take it to mean: “Du gleichst dem Geist,

den Du begreifst, / Nicht mir!” (“You are like the spirit whom you comprehend/Not me” [*Faust*, ll. 512–13]). The truth of the castle condescends to be known not as it is in itself but in a manner defined by the capacities of the subject, a manner that does not allow it to be penetrated. Truth can be known by the human subject only as what that truth is not.

But here, for one moment, the discouraging condescension of the adversary appears as only one side of K’s relation of the castle: his stubborn, mensurative mind seeks a balance of powers. “On the other hand, it was favorable,” he thinks of the readiness of the castle to take up the gage,

for it proved to his mind that they underestimated him and that he would enjoy greater freedom than he could have hoped for at the beginning. And if they thought they could keep him terrified all the time simply by acknowledging his surveyorship—though this was certainly a superior move on their part—then they were mistaken, for he felt only a slight shudder, that was all. (C 5)

There is a Promethean, an altogether usurpatory feeling, to such parables of mastery in their independence of custom and law.³⁴ What is here called “Promethean” could equally be called, following Benjamin, a “primordial satanic promise: what is alluring: the semblance of freedom in the fathoming of what is forbidden.”³⁵ Yet, all in all, the tonality of this act of apparent hermeneutic mastery over the castle is a much menaced, merely dusky and delusory occasion of the “triumph and delight, hope and fear” that Wordsworth celebrated. Indeed, later in the novel, Olga alleges, with remarkable penetration, apropos the letters that K has received from Klamm, the fallibility of all such interpretation:

And staying in the middle between the exaggerations, that is, weighing the letters correctly is impossible, their value keeps changing, the thoughts that they prompt are endless and the point at which one happens to stop is determined only by accident and so the opinion one arrives at is just as accidental. (C 231)

This observation says a great deal about the random character of the signs, forms, and impressions administered in the modern period.

The moment of K’s putative victory remains significant for the wider logic of the novel: it represents the impersonal struggle with the other as a cognitive relation and then by degrees as an intersubjective relation. But what is finally at stake is a mode of practical being, something to *do* with the truth.³⁶ The possibility, however, of *action* in the castle world remains inhibited by a general uncertainty of orientation—about what would constitute the true direction to what is genuinely opposed. This world is shot through with bewildering administrative directions, interrupted both lit-

erally and figuratively by a traffic in signs requiring K's attention. No part of this world escapes this circulation (ridiculed as "chatter [*Geschwätz*]"); even the straightforward identity of the emitter of signs is compromised, for the village is indistinguishable from the castle ("had one not known that this was a castle, one could have taken it for a small town" [C 8]); even the village inhabitants are indistinguishable from the castle ("there is no difference between the peasants and the castle" [C 9]). The castle and its environs are a single bureaucratic institution, marked by the ubiquity of its written signs and the untraceableness of their circulation: it is chiefly in this sense that the castle is a figure for the "house" of writerly being, *Schriftstellersein*. The word "bureaucratic," above, should point to a maximum of detail and complication, of mediation that has lost the knowledge of the straight way and has turned in upon itself. This point is made in *The Castle* with delicious irony: "Should it [the file] ever lose its way, the excellence of the organization is such that the file must zealously seek the wrong way, for otherwise it won't find it, and then it does indeed take a long time" (C 63). One recalls throughout Kafka's drama of writing, the many instances where the simple inverse of this point occurs, and writing falls effortlessly "in the shameful lowlands of writing" (D1 276). The comedic castle version would liberate Kafka from the anguish of writing that has lost its way.

We have insisted, somewhat monomaniacally, on the aptness of the bureaucratic castle world to "writerly being," yet isn't this identification finally rather restrictive? To be sure, *The Castle* is encyclopedic, comprising forms of life that invite study through the lens of political philosophy (we have the story of an individual seeking citizenship and the rights that pertain to it in modern societies having democratic and liberal features);³⁷ through linguistic philosophy (the novel's notions of transgression, collaborative hermeneutics, and textually modeled culture tie it into the work of the Prague School);³⁸ through stereotypical *fin de siècle* gender politics (the woman appears as pawn, as whore, as ascetic priestess) . . . this list of applications can be broadly extended. Accordingly, Hartmut Binder had uncovered a wide range of empirical references serving as raw material for Kafka's fictive constructions.³⁹ But here, along with every reader's debt to Binder's findings, one cannot but recall Kafka's poetological advertisement invoking "the freedom of authentic description . . . that releases one's foot from lived experience" (D1 100). Binder's massive study presents plausible models for the likes of Frieda and Klamm and does not fail to see Kafka himself the writer underpinning the representation of Momus, Klamm's secretary. The association is cogent—and witty: Momus takes down evidence, of course, and moreover, alights in the castle world from a Greek mythological cloud; from Hesiod on, he is the small god of carping criticism.⁴⁰ There

is no question but that this chapter 9, “Struggle Against a Hearing,” is full of parodic resonances with Kafka’s own writing practices. The difference, however, between Binder’s thesis and my own is that I see *no* essential feature of the action of *The Castle* that does not resonate with Kafka’s sense of his fate as a writer.

Furthermore, it would be understandable if one were to object, But surely the bureaucratic world, for Kafka, the drear of office life, is constitutive only *by negation* of the writer’s world. It is this other life that literature dramatizes as its enemy, as the continual threat of its undoing—a counterliterature, for “*real hell is there in the office, no other can hold any terror for me*” (LF 238). But bureaucracy is at the same time a leading, a capacious metaphor of the a priori otherness of Kafka to himself—his second nature—as he himself noted more than once. He wrote of himself as “I—or the deep-seated bureaucrat inside me—which is the same thing” (L 134) and of “the born-and-bred (*großgezogen*) official inside me” (LF 462).⁴¹ Until now we have seen Kafka define the sense of his strange, deep-seated, second nature through the metaphor of writerly being. Now we see him defining this strangeness to self through the metaphor of “bureaucratic being,” but it should come as no surprise, since both metaphors have in common the fact that they are uncentered writing agencies.

The specter of bureaucracy haunts Kafka day and night in every corner of his writing life. I use the word “specter” advisedly. In the letter to Milena earlier cited, Kafka described the office as “not dumb but phantasmal [*phantastisch*].” At the end of a day in 1911, having written nothing, Kafka noted in his diaries, “How do I excuse my not yet having written anything today? In no way [*mit nichts*]. . . . I have continually an invocation in my ear: ‘If you would come, invisible court [*Gericht*]!’” (KSS 194). It is wonderful to reflect on whether the court is literature itself (and that might be a good thing or a bad thing—writing come to save him or writing come in an angry mood to chide him). Or else, the court might constitute an extraliterary ethical agency, as in *The Trial*, alert to punish him for dereliction of duty. But in each case, writing appears as an institution or as the concern of an institution and, as a court in the modern age, necessarily a bureaucracy. So there was scarcely a day or night in which Kafka did not write something for the bureaucracy—the objective form of which he knew daily, outside in, as Chief Legal Secretary of the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute. In this light, in its proximity to his writing, Kafka’s office life cannot be summed up as pure waste, pure suffering. Aside from its ludic dimension, in the matter of its supplying Kafka with theme and substance—our starting point—the English Germanist Jeremy Adler observes:

Although Kafka constantly stresses the conflict between his writing and his profession, this perceived dualism . . . provides the premise for his authorship, enabling him to write about modernity and its discontents from the inside. . . . His job brought him into direct contact with industrialization, mechanization, and bureaucracy, as well as with the struggle between capital and labor, and his official writings antedate his literary breakthrough.⁴²

There is a relevant irony in the workings of this negative, this “hell”: it is not the *opposite* of writerly being; it shares its territory, it is an insistent and provocative double; and even as “hell,” and hence the outcome of “service to the devil,” it is, once again, like writing itself. Kafka imagined that he needed only to throw his duties at the office out of the “complex” of writing to be free,⁴³ but his confessional writings show time and again that, though on leave from the office, he accomplished little. It is a hook into the real, and hence a “brother *adversary*,” but purely adversarial only in the sense that it is an empirical distraction. True, his office work could never, by itself, under the real conditions of its operations as a governmental insurance agency, be a source of justification. Yet in its aspect as script—as the impersonal circulation of signs—it held for him a baffling fraternal likeness to the movement of writing: its “laws” are beyond ego, uncontrollable, self-involved: “Our fumbling interpretations,” we recall, “are powerless to deal with the ‘evolutions’/enhancements/climaxes [*Steigerungen*] of which the bureaucracy is capable” (L 328–29).⁴⁴ In the pages that follow, we hope to illustrate the writerly elegance of many of the documents that Kafka produced at work. The office was a world of signs on the surface of paper—in the purest sense, in Benjamin’s phrase, “the sign-script of transience.”⁴⁵ And since transience is another name for the everyday, for the contents of lived experience under the conditions of modernity, then, in its processing of industrial “cases”—of accidents to which Kafka the bourgeois would not have had access—the office supplied him with a subject matter to consume. It is not these “real things” that are vivid in *The Castle*: the novel does not do the history of land surveying or the telephone or the fire department, though these modern entities make a fleeting appearance. It is the spiraling self-involvement of office-generated signs—of letters and files, of interpretations gone mad amid the rumor of laws—that captivates Kafka. In *The Castle*, by a bold creative act of fusion, the bureaucracy becomes the house of an ideal in which writing is at home: Kafka shelters the terrible-sacred, the numinous, of the writing destiny in the profane hell of office life.

The mood of gaiety, of sly good humor, that glances off the pages of *The Castle* would be Kafka’s bliss in joining, at the order of this fiction,

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his two alien worlds: the being of the writerly life, the being of bureaucracy. What a happy thing to make the hell of bureaucracy redound to the benefit of his fiction. It is finally the only happiness Kafka could know: linking, fusing together in literature, contesting parts of the structure of his desire, “the tremendous/monstrous [*ungeheure*] world I have in my head” (D1 288). There is a frightening strangeness in the substance of the myth—this bureaucratic castle world—but a giddy bliss, too, in playing the trick of fictive mastery over it.