ABSTRACT

BARBEAU, ROBERT RUSSELL. The Compulsion to Repeat and the Death Instinct in Franz Kafka’s “The Judgment” and *The Trial*. (Under the direction of Hans Kellner.)

Kafka’s well-known obsessions with both language and death need to be understood in light of their common factor—the psychoanalytic concept of the repetition compulsion. Since these obsessions act as motivating forces compelling Kafka’s writing, it is crucial to understand the constitutive nature of the repetition compulsion in Kafka’s texts by examining its presence in two of his prominent works, “The Judgment” and *The Trial*. I will begin this study by first establishing my theoretical framework, defining the compulsion to repeat and the death instinct as they function in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Next I will differentiate Lacan’s (re)formulation of the repetition compulsion and the death instinct and show the critical role the symbolic order *qua* language has in this conception. Following this, I will examine Kafka’s story, “The Judgment,” looking at a typical piece of psychoanalytic criticism focused on Kafka’s supposed Oedipus complex and then showing the pitfalls of such an approach. I will go on to show the possibilities for deeper readings offered by post-Freudian psychoanalytic concepts, focusing on the repetitive and constitutive role that the letter has for the subject, the function of the return of the repressed, and the significance of the space “between two deaths,” where the story ends. The next section will examine *The Trial* in a similar manner; the focus will be on the importance of language in the novel, including the court as an agency of language and also the role lying or deceit plays in signification. I will also address the effect on K. of the initial trauma of his arrest, the role of memory and forgetting in the novel, and the relevance of the space “between two deaths.”
The compulsion to repeat and the death instinct in Franz Kafka’s “The Judgment” and The Trial.

by

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BIOGRAPHY

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Without the instruction of Nick Halpern, I might never have read Kafka or pursued the study of literature. The influence his teaching has had on me cannot be understated, nor can my gratitude to him.

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Introduction: The Compulsion to Repeat and the Death Drive

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BON ............ *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Franz Kafka

CP .................*Collected Papers*, Sigmund Freud

CS .................*The Complete Stories*, Franz Kafka

DR .................*Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze

  * Note that the original French pagination will be cited following the English page number, for example: (ÉC 61/271), where 271 is the page number of the cited passage in the original French edition.

ÉS .................*Écrits: A Selection*, Jacques Lacan
  * The same convention as above will be used for this edition as well.

EYS .................*Enjoy Your Symptom!*, Slavoj Žižek

RD .................*the Rome Discourse, or “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis”*, Jacques Lacan
  * As the Rome Discourse is published in the *Écrits*, the same convention applies. Unless otherwise noted, citations of the Rome Discourse will come from the Selection and not the Complete Edition.


  * Note that the volume number will follow, preceding the page number in citations, for example: (SE 10, 179) refers to page 179 of volume 10 of The Standard Edition.

SOI .................*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek

Introduction: The Compulsion to Repeat and the Death Drive

Kafka’s obsessions with both language and death are often overshadowed by what many perceive as his obsession with the strained relationship he had with his father. This has led to the view that both Kafka and his work are symptomatic of an unresolved Oedipus complex. The unfortunate consequence of such a view is that a small portion of Kafka’s texts have disproportionately influenced how Kafka is perceived today. While Kafka’s literary career spanned roughly twenty-five years, from as early as 1899 until his death in 1924, the “father texts” were composed during the seven-year span from 1912 to 1919 and comprise only a small portion of his total output.

More consistent and quite frankly more relevant throughout Kafka’s career are his obsessions with death and language. The significance of these obsessions for psychoanalytic criticism is that they are joined by a common factor: the compulsion to repeat. Since these obsessions act as motivating forces compelling Kafka’s writing, it is crucial to understand the constitutive nature of the repetition compulsion in Kafka’s texts by examining its presence in two of his prominent works, “The Judgment” and The Trial. It is through Kafka’s exploitation of this triumvirate of language, death, and repetition that his work carries such power and remains enigmatic: in short, these forces facilitate the Kafkaesque.

One of the central conflicts of Kafka’s literary career is the conflict facing humanity, as asserted by Freud: “every individual is virtually an enemy of civilisation, though civilisation is supposed to be an object of universal human interest” (Freud Future 6). Kafka tortured himself with the dilemma of whether to ally with civilization (and hence Felice, his family, his work) or to ally with self (viz. art and literature). The tremendous irony of Kafka
is the unfortunate realization that happiness is not possible. Civilization, if fundamentally averse to the individual, offers no possibility of individual happiness, and yet the self-indulgence of the individual essentially leads to unhappiness as well, since this indulgence and the individual exist in the abstentious and communal environment that is society. Moreover, the individual—as product of a social milieu and hence a product of the symbolic order—can never be happy due to the nature of desire and the lack at the heart of the symbolic order. In the final analysis, the individual cannot find happiness in society, yet the individual cannot find happiness without society.

Impossibilities such as this characterize Kafka’s work, as well as his meditations on the nature of language and the goal of his writing: “I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones and which can only be experienced in those bones” (Kafka, qtd. in Pawel 96). And as noted by Zadie Smith, “[t]he peculiar beauty of Kafka lies in the very impossibility of his project, which was, I think, to express concretely—in the most precise language available—those things in life that fall outside of the concretely explicable or expressible” (Smith 35).

His obsession with death is equally important in his conception of writing and his goals and aspirations therein:

All these fine and very convincing passages always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this, or at least he should be. But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own
death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on
death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose
that he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is
as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case
with a real lament, but dies beautifully and purely away. (13 Dec. 1914)

Even in a passage such as this one from his diaries, we see the emergence of the compulsion
to repeat motivating Kafka’s work, not to mention its convergence with the death instinct and
language. As Pamela Thurschwell explains of Freud’s concept of the repetition compulsion
and its relationship to the death instinct: “Reenacting unpleasurable experiences comes to
seem like a rehearsal for one’s own death” (Thurschwell 88). But before I go much further, I
must discuss some psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, which
form the theoretical framework of this study.

Freud’s Theory and Beyond

The compulsion to repeat may be broadly defined as the tendency or impulse of a
person inadvertently to repeat traumatic events in an attempt to deal with them. In
psychoanalysis, the compulsion to repeat defines the subject’s conscious or unconscious
tendency to revisit, relive, or otherwise repeat traumatic episodes in an attempt to confront or
master the traumatic event. These repetitions take the form of recurrent dreams, decision
making, or the like; the psychic symptom itself is fundamentally an act of repetition
(Laplanche and Pontalis 78).

The importance of repetition begins to emerge in Freud’s work around 1914, in the
article “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through.” But the significance with which
Freud would eventually view the repetition compulsion, in one of the final revisions of his theory, would not become evident until some years later, when *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* appears in 1920. Freud addresses the compulsion to repeat most directly in this pivotal essay, where the idea of the “death instinct” first appears as well. Freud intimately associates the repetition compulsion and the death instinct, asserting that the compulsion to repeat traumatic events is a manifestation of the death instinct.

For psychoanalysis, the interest in the repetition compulsion itself is that what is repeated tends to be unpleasant for the subject, and it is this repetition of “unpleasure” which led Freud to theorize a death instinct that seeks a return to the inanimate state of existence which precedes organic life. What makes *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the compulsion to repeat so important in Freud’s theory is that this compulsion subverts the dominance of the pleasure principle, a basic assertion of Freud’s since *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud faced the dilemma that either his fundamental assertion was incorrect (namely, that the reality principle holds in check the polymorphous perversity of the pleasure principle, which seeks only its own fulfillment and thus its termination), or that he misconceptualized or misunderstood the nature of the motivating forces at work in the psyche. Freud needed to account for these lapses in the pleasure principle, and he eventually began to theorize a primary drive which precedes even the pleasure principle: the death drive. The gaps in the pleasure principle as manifested in the repetition compulsion reveal this primal (homeo)static drive (*Trieb*). The death instinct operates in opposition to the life instincts (Eros), since the death instinct clearly is a destructive tendency pushing toward the reversion of organic matter

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1 As noted in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, the translation of Freud’s *Trieb* has posed dilemmas for translators in both French (*pulsion/instinct*) and English (drive/instinct); given the variety in the literature, the two will simply be used interchangeably in this paper, despite the connotative loss associated with either.
back into an inert, inorganic state. Freud’s previous dialectic between the pleasure principle and the reality principle essentially operated as a function of Eros.

The psychoanalytic community at large was baffled by this shift in Freud’s theory, perhaps because this revision to the theory hints at the futility of psychoanalysis as a rehabilitative treatment. Many dismissed it as a text which spoke more to Freud’s ability as a writer rather than considering the concepts themselves as a legitimate succession in the evolution of Freud’s thought. Some did not concede even that much, calling the final chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* “incomprehensible” (as discussed by Lacan in *Book II* of his seminars, p. 37). Even today, only the disciples of Klein and Lacan embrace these concepts, and moreover, as Lacan notes, it is often without understanding exactly what they are.

*The Role of Language*

As Freud began to explore the concepts of the compulsion to repeat and the death instinct, he hypothesized a tension between the two. The medium which conducts this tension is that of language: “in Freud’s later theory, negation, a fundamental principle in language, is regarded as a derivative of the death instinct” (Brown 69). Norman O. Brown also points out the following passage in Freud’s article on “Negation”:

> Affirmation, as being a substitute for union, belongs to Eros; while negation, the derivative of expulsion, belongs to the instinct of destruction. . . . This view of negation harmonizes very well with the fact that in analysis we never discover a “No” in the unconscious, and that a recognition of the unconscious
on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula. There is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in uncovering the unconscious than when the patient reacts with the words “I didn’t think that” or “I never thought of that.” (CP5 185)

While in this excerpt Freud does not make explicit the connection between language and repetition, “we can see Freud practically producing this field of investigation by noticing in his patients’ speech what appears again and again in their dreams and parapraxes” (Miller 10).

Freud comes closest to an explicit association between repetition and language in his examinations of the (anatomical) mechanism of perception in both *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Ego and the Id*. This again shows Freud’s desire to root his theory strongly in biology, and neurology in this specific case. In chapter four of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discusses a cerebral cortical layer which dampens or buffers the energy of external stimuli or sensation, and it is on this cortex where consciousness resides (hence his system, perception-consciousness, or “Pcpt.-Cs.”). However, in *The Ego and the Id* Freud admits trying to shift the ideas he developed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (which were based more in biology) back into the realm of psychoanalysis (SE 19, 12). In *The Ego and the Id*, the role of consciousness previously described as a function of the cerebral cortex becomes a function of the ego. Freud is very careful, however, not to equate consciousness with the ego. He reiterates the fact that there is unquestionably an element of the unconscious id which is fairly accessible to the ego. The point of the unconscious-becoming-conscious is the same point at which language emerges: “the question, ‘How does a thing become

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2 Compare this “negative formula” to the idea from structural linguistics of language as a collection of signifiers which are negatively defined in relation to each other, an idea pertinent to the discussion of Lacan to follow.
conscious?’ would thus be more advantageously stated: ‘How does a thing become preconscious?’ And the answer would be: ‘Through becoming connected with the word-representations\(^3\) corresponding to it’” (SE 19, 21). Turning again to Norman O. Brown, one can relate the function of the ego to language in a different manner:

The ego, to be sure, must always mediate between external reality and the id; but the human ego, not strong enough to accept the reality of death, can perform this mediating function only on condition of developing a certain opacity protecting the organism from reality. The way the human organism protects itself from the reality of living-and-dying is, ironically, by initiating a more active form of dying, and this more active form of dying is negation. . . . Through negation life and death are diluted to the point that we can bear them. . . . This dilution of life is desexualization. . . . Sublimations, as desexualizations, are not really deflections (changes of aim) of bodily Eros, but negations. (Brown 160-1)

When Brown (and Freud before him) describes the ego as that which “must always mediate between external reality and the id,” they touch on the fact that what mediates between external reality \textit{qua} stimulus and the function of consciousness or perception is language itself. “The way the human organism protects itself from the reality of living-and-dying is, ironically, by initiating \textit{a more active form of dying, and this more active form of dying is negation},” and as quoted earlier, Brown has shown the association between negation with language.

\(^3\) cf. Joan Riviere’s authorized translation, developed in conjunction with Freud himself, Ernst Jones, Anna Freud, and James Strachey (Riviere 6). Riviere’s translation reads “verbal images” (21) rather than “word-representations.” The discrepancy underscores the fact that the concept at hand, \textit{Wortvorstellungen}, is something which is neither wholly an image nor wholly a word itself.
The idea of protection Brown writes of here also relates back to Freud’s anatomical line of inquiry in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In chapters four and five, Freud delves into the role of the cortical layer as a protective shield, which dissipates the cathetic energy introduced by (external) sensation. This shield, Freud says, serves as a barrier or buffer and therefore must be, in a certain sense, dead or “to some degree inorganic” (SE 18, 27):

> By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli. The protective shield is supplied with its own store of energy and must above all endeavor to preserve the special modes of transformation of energy operating in it against the effects threatened by the enormous energies at work in the external world—effects which tend towards a leveling out of them and hence towards destruction. (SE 18, 27, Freud’s emphasis).

In a way, this “to some degree inorganic” material which mitigates the destructive tendencies of external energy is exactly this “more active form of dying” Brown writes of. The function of mitigating or mediating performed by the cortical layer is essentially analogous to the function of negation performed by the ego.

This is getting fairly abstract and somewhat tangential to the topic at hand, namely, the relationship between death, language, and repetition. To be clear, the relationship at this point is as follows: death is mitigated by negation, meaning in language is derived only from negation, and language is essentially a repetitive act. It is with these associations in mind that
I will examine how Lacan treats this topic, which varies from the point I have reached with Freud.

_Lacan: Language, Repetition, Death_

Lacan’s conception of the relationships between language, the repetition compulsion, and the death instinct are expectedly abstruse, although deceptively transparent. Dylan Evans writes that Lacan “argues that the death drive is simply the fundamental tendency of the symbolic order to produce repetition; ‘The death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order’ (S2 326)” (32). It is with such nonchalance that the death instinct, the symbolic order, and the repetition compulsion in Lacan’s theory are often knitted together. But what is the relationship here? This question must be addressed before moving on.

As with Freud, for Lacan language acts in the agency of a medium, relating the symbolic order and the compulsion to repeat (or the “insistence of the signifier” as he sometimes calls the repetition compulsion). Lacan’s alternation between these terms (among several others) shows how important language is (and its element, the signifier) in his conception of the repetition compulsion. They are essentially one and the same: “repetition is fundamentally the insistence of speech” (S3 242, qtd. in Evans 164). Language lies largely within the domain of the symbolic order (though the imaginary is relevant to language, as well [Evans 98]). The symbolic order—the Law, the Name of the Father, the Phallus: in short, the _Author-ity_—derives its Authority from language, hence the relationship between

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4 The etymology of “author” supports its identification with the aforementioned notions Lacan associates with the symbolic order. From the _Oxford English Dictionary_: “n. AF. _auteur_ = OF. _auteur_, later _auteur_, ad. L. _auctor_, agent-noun f. _augère_ to make to grow, originate, promote, increase. Already in 14th c. F., occasionally written _auct_ after _L_, which became the ordinary spelling in Eng. in 15-16th c., and was further corrupted to _act_, from med.L. confusion of _auctor_ and _actor_. . . .”

An examination of the Latin: “_auctor_ - m. - one who gives increase. Hence . . . an originator, causer, doer; founder of a family; architect of a building; author of a book; originator of or leader in an enterprise;
language and the symbolic order. It is critical to note that while an intimate relationship exists between language and the symbolic, there is no identification between the two due to the role of the imaginary in language.

Similarly, the connection between the symbolic order and the death instinct essentially lies within the field of language, or more generally, in the symbol itself (as elemental unit of the symbolic order). In “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (also known as the “Rome Discourse,” and to be henceforth referred to as such), Lacan writes: “the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing [la chose], and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire.” Immediately following this, he reiterates this relationship between death and the symbol: “The first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestiges is the burial [la sépulture]” (RD

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source of or warrant for a piece of information (Latin Dict.). A curious similarity (though of no etymological significance) is that between the French words auteur (author) and Autre (Other). However, as in English, the etymology leads to different Latin words: auctor (author) and alter (other).

One final aside worth mentioning is that the confusion between auctor and actor mentioned in the OED’s etymology of “author” brings to mind Deleuze’s discussion of masks, acting, and theater in general with regard to Freud’s treatment of death and repetition in Beyond the Pleasure Principle: “Death has nothing to do with a material model. On the contrary, the death instinct may be understood in relation to masks and costumes. Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself” (Difference and Repetition 17).

I assume Lacan’s use of la chose here is in a mundane sense of “the thing”—the thing as “object,” or at most, perhaps the thing as the “signified”—rather than in the sense he uses later in the Écrits (EC 550/656) and in Book VII of his seminars. There, he infuses la Chose with a Freudian association, opposing his own concept of the Thing (la Chose, das Ding) to Freud’s die Sache (from Freud’s discussion of Sachvorstellungen, “thing-presentations” in his article on “The Unconscious”) (Evans 204). Lacan’s la Chose or das Ding is “the thing in its ‘dumb reality’ (S7 55), the thing in the real, which is ‘the beyond-of-the-signified’ (S7 54) (Evans 204). The issue here of whether a distinction need be made between la chose and la Chose is a question of the location of the boundary between signification (la chose) and ineffability (la Chose, das Ding). A boundary, by its very nature as something which defines, must belong in the symbolic order. The paradox emerges that, by nature of the symbolic, the boundary must be defined; yet a steadfast definition of the boundary would partially subsume the Real, which is (by the nature of the Real) indefinable. This paradox is essentially the same as the question of (pre)consciousness Freud addresses in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and The Ego and the Id. Lacan’s das Ding becomes the “dead” thing [la chose] at its emergence in language, or in Freud’s words: “Through becoming connected with the word-representations corresponding to it” (SE 19 20).

Alan Sheridan translates la sépulture as “tomb” (Evans 31), which carries the connotations of a structure qua object, while Fink’s translation, “burial,” connotes the action of burying and the ceremonial (symbolic) process associated with funerals. I am unsure whether Lacan’s intent in his use of la sépulture is one, the other, or both.
Immutability, \(^7\) then, becomes the factor which links death to language and by extension, to the symbolic order, since the usurpation of “the thing” by the symbol is the death of the thing.

Finally, I must address the relation between the death instinct and the repetition compulsion in Lacan’s theory. Actually, this has been mentioned among the preceding quotations from the *Écrits*: “this death [of the thing] results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (RD 101/319). The “endless perpetuation”—that is, the repetition—“of the subject’s desire” results from the death of the thing, or more accurately: from the destructive instinct which led to its death. So certainly desire links the death instinct and the compulsion to repeat. However, since desire is so central in Lacan’s work, this explanation should not suffice. After all, desire is fundamental in Lacan’s conception of both the symbolic order (desire, resulting from a lack, constitutes the symbolic) and language (“Desire . . . is the desire for nothing nameable” [S2 223]\(^8\]). What connects the death instinct and the repetition compulsion—in conjunction with the aforementioned connection via desire—is Lacan’s assertion that the subject desires to realize *jouissance*, pleasure realized to the point of pain or suffering.

The prohibition of *jouissance* (the pleasure principle) is inherent in the symbolic structure of language, which is why “*jouissance* is forbidden to him who speaks, as such”. . . . The death drive is the name given to that constant desire in the subject to break through the pleasure principle towards the Thing

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\(^7\) We find the relevance to Kafka of immutability and language in *The Trial*: “The text is immutable, and the opinions are often only an expression of despair over it” (220). This will be discussed in section three.

\(^8\) See chapters 18 and 19 of Book II of his seminars, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, in which Lacan thoroughly addresses the relationship between desire and language. For example: “Desire always becomes manifest at the joint of speech, where it makes its appearance, its sudden emergence, its surge forwards. Desire emerges just as it becomes embodied in speech, it emerges with symbolism” (S2 234).
(Das Ding) and a certain excess jouissance; thus jouissance is ‘the path
towards death’. (Evans 92)

The symbolic order, the Name of the Father (le nom du Père), is the same agency which
structures language while creating Law through its prohibitions (the No of the Father, le non
du Père). Jouissance thus distinguishes the relationship between the death instinct and the
repetition compulsion from their respective relationships to the symbolic via language.

Despite the significant roles played by the death instinct and the compulsion to repeat in
language and hence in the symbolic, this shared striving for jouissance prevents the symbolic
order from subsuming them completely.

An equally important clarification is that the compulsion to repeat, the death instinct,
and the symbolic —like Lacan’s structuration of the psyche into the Real, imaginary, and
symbolic orders—cannot exist independently. Dylan Evans offers this explanation of their
interdependence: “(i) every drive pursues its own extinction, (ii) every drive involves the
subject in repetition, and (iii) every drive is an attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle, to
the realm of jouissance where enjoyment is experienced as suffering” (33).

Despite Lacan’s concern over the use of images as an exegetic tool in psychoanalytic
theory, I have described in a model (Fig. 1) the interdependence of these concepts.

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9 Recall the characteristic of the signifier whereby meaning is determined negatively based on other signifiers—
that is: as that which the signified is not. Hence this negation, le non du Père, connects the aspects of the
symbolic order as language, Law, Father, and Authority.

10 See chapter 5 in Book II of his seminars. In response to a diagram used in the previous night’s lecture by
Serge Leclaire, presumably on the nature of subjectivity, Lacan says: “I think that, with the aim of making his
constructions hold up – and it is indeed this aim which accounts for the fact that he presented his model to us as
a pyramid, firmly seated on its bottom, and not on its tip – Leclaire made the subject into some sort of idol”
(53). In my diagram, however, the “idol” atop the pyramid is the symbolic order, which Lacan certainly idolizes
in a way throughout his theory. For example: “The first symbol in which we recognize man in its vestiges is the
burial, and death as a means can be recognized in every relation in which man is born into the life of his history.
[…] This [life in the symbolic] is the only life that endures [perdure] and is true” (RD 101/319).

An interesting aside is Lacan’s use of perdure in the original text. The English word “perdure” lacks
the connotation of grief or suffering associate with “endure.” “Perdure” is simply the ability to continue or last.
The word in either language is sufficiently uncommon enough to assume Lacan’s intent here is to pun on the
Fig. 1. The Interdependence of the Symbolic Order, the Death Drive, and the Repetition Compulsion in Lacan. Note the position of the death instinct, *jouissance*, and the repetition compulsion—all of which are significantly constituted by the Real. This base position can be considered “beyond the pleasure principle,” which presumably lies between language and the elements of the Real.

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similarity between *perdure* and *perdu(e)*, an adjective overflowing with denotations: “Lost; ruined, undone, done for, wasted; wreck; dishonoured; spoilt; stray, forlorn; obsolete; out of use; out of the way, sequestered; bewildered; ... madman; ... random; un trou perdu, a dead and alive hole” (“perdu,” Cassell’s French Dictionary 554). This last nuance, wherein *perdu* suggests life and death, seems particularly appropriate to the subject Lacan discusses in the passage—namely, that the symbol manifests death “in every relation in which man is born into the life of his history.”
The Relevance to Literature and to Kafka

MARCELLUS. Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio. BERNARDO. Looks it not like the king? mark it, Horatio. HORATIO. Most like: it harrows me with fear and wonder. - *Hamlet*, I.i.42-4

Now that the relationship between the repetition compulsion, the death drive, and language has been examined in both Freud and Lacan’s work, I will show the significance of these ideas in literature, and specifically in Kafka’s work. The relevance of these concepts to literature is obviously the essential role of language as the medium which facilitates the interaction among them. And of course, literature has been fundamental in psychoanalysis, going back to Freud’s extensive exegetical use of literature throughout his work. Likewise, Lacan also relies on literature to explain his theory, most notably his 1954 “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” his examination of Hamlet in 1959’s “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet,*” and his discussion of *Antigone,* entitled “The Essence of Tragedy,” during the seminar of 1960.

In the examinations of *Hamlet* and *Antigone,* an interesting facet emerges of Lacan’s conceptualization of the death instinct, the repetition compulsion, and the symbolic. It is during this period when Lacan develops the notion of the “two deaths.” Due to the subject’s immersion in and constitution by the symbolic order, he faces the possibility of not only a physical death in the Real but also a death in the symbolic order, whereby the subject is condemned, expelled, or otherwise refused by the symbolic community. This allows for a death without life and a life without death: “a life that is about to turn into certain death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves
into the realm of death” (S7 248). In *Hamlet*, Lacan argues that Hamlet’s father represents the deathly life: his death in the Real is unaccompanied by his symbolic death, a “settling of accounts” whereby the subject is “released” from the symbolic order. Similarly, Lacan analyzes Antigone from Sophocles’ Theban plays, where her situation is the opposite of Hamlet’s father’s. When Creon condemns Antigone to death, her death in the symbolic precedes her actual death:

CHORUS. So her death-warrant, it would seem, is sealed.

CREON. By you, as first by me. (lines 576-711)

This confirmation by Creon shows the chorus’s complicity or agreement in her symbolic death, since the role of the chorus is precisely that of symbolic community and the role of Creon is obviously that of the symbolic Father, Law, and Authority besides.

It is important to understand that these ideas are critically relevant to the world of Kafka’s literature—these are not simply theoretical tricks or games. Kafka’s work has remained incredibly elusive throughout the near century of criticism that has attempted to explain it. Laplanche, in discussing the compulsion to repeat as “the return of the repressed,” quotes Freud, that “a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears, like an unlaid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken.” (Freud, qtd. in Laplanche 79). Kafka’s work—if one can say anything decisive about it—is exactly such “a thing which has not been understood [that] inevitably reappears, like an unlaid ghost.” In a way Kafka’s oeuvre is a text “between two deaths,” a wealth of fragments, the symbolic debts of which can never be repaid in full, accounts which can never be settled.

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11 All subsequent citations to Sophocles’s trilogy of Theban plays will cite the line number in the original Greek rather than a page number.
The void space in which Antigone exists between her symbolic death and her death in the Real is described by Žižek as “a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters” (SOI 135). It is precisely in this space “between two deaths” where Kafka’s obsessions brood, where his work realizes itself as Kafkaesque. The marginality and alienation that Kafka felt and that his work manifests is exactly such an exclusion from the symbolic, the Name of the Father. Yet he remains relentlessly trapped within a Reality which he lacks the language to describe with the authority and precision he wishes he could.

A desire for authority or mastery fits well in this discussion, as the questions associated with Freud’s explanation of negation (as a form of the psychic attempt to deal with death) and the issue of Authority inherent in Lacan’s theory are both essentially questions of mastery. As Freud states in “The Economic Problem of Masochism”: “The libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfills the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards . . . towards objects in the external world. The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power” (SE 19, 163, emphasis added). The crucial distinction is that the instinct for mastery is the subject’s instinct for mastery within the symbolic; however, the subject can never be master but must always be supplicant or slave, since the symbolic qua Authority is master by definition.

Another reason why these concepts are relevant in Kafka may be found in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, as well. In rooting his theory in biology, as Freud is wont to do, he writes of the behavior of the germ-cell: “It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other
group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey” (SE 18, 40-1). To relate this to Kafka does not take much effort: the drives that Freud places in biology may be transposed onto Kafka’s relationship to writing. He forever wants his composition of the text to rush forward, and much of his frustration with his work doubtless finds a source here. His articulation of this desire to write with a fluid coherence comes in the oft quoted diary entry after his marathon composition of “The Judgment”: “Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and soul” (23 Sept. 1912, Kafka’s emphasis). Also, Breon Mitchell notes of Kafka’s manuscripts, as he grew engrossed in the composition of a text, Kafka’s handwriting became fluid, with the effect that mechanical errors increased due to the speed with which the story emerged from him (xvi-xvii). This breakdown in the mechanics of the text—when viewed alongside Kafka's desire for the composition of a story to be a “complete opening out of the body and soul,” a description that suggests not only the breakdown of the body upon death but also the transcendence of the soul—points towards a destructive instinct such as that which Freud alludes to in the above passage of Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The irony of such a reading of Kafka’s creative process is that what may be reasonably assumed to be obstacles in his creative process—his pursuit of perfection and mastery in fiction coupled with his severely critical readings of his own work—actually function as the (pro)creative forces which “jerk back” the unrelenting inertia of the destructive instinct.

Finally, one more idea stems from these psychoanalytic concepts that is relevant in examining Kafka’s texts: the idea of the “return of the repressed.” A large body of psychoanalytic criticism of Kafka and particularly his “father texts” argues the centrality in Kafka’s work of his tense relationship with his father, Hermann. Such criticism often claims
this relationship was Oedipal in nature, thus in some sense a “return of the repressed,” and that this tension was a major catalyst behind Kafka’s motivation to write. In the section which follows, I will look at in Kafka’s renowned “father text,” “The Judgment,” showing some pitfalls of such interpretations of how the return of the repressed functions. I will then offer my own interpretation which moves away from these Oedipal readings.
“The Judgment”: The Father and Worse

Much has been said in Kafka scholarship of the relationship between Franz and Hermann Kafka—specifically, what Frederick Robert Karl refers to as “the standard Oedipal drama” (189) between the two—and its emergence in Kafka’s writing. The two preeminent examples of this manifestation, of course, are “The Judgment” and the “Letter to His Father.” However, in a psychoanalytic approach to Kafka and these works specifically, it is important to note that these manifestations of Kafka’s Oedipal battle with his father are just that: manifest. Psychoanalytic readings of these pieces which focus on the Oedipal conflict become victims of Kafka’s misdirection. Even in reflecting on his marathon composition of “The Judgment”—Kafka’s most fluidly composed text, and a lucid example of the temptation to characterize the story as an Oedipal conflict—Kafka explicitly acknowledges the conscious consideration of Freud (presumably the Oedipus complex): “thoughts about Freud, of course” (23 Sept. 1912).

In other words, the Oedipal conflict as conveyed in Kafka’s writings is obvious enough to act as a psychoanalytic smoke screen or decoy—a distortion—and any psychoanalytic interpretation focusing on the Oedipal conflict must account for Kafka’s knowledge of Freud and the Oedipus complex. As Walter Sokel noted, the “Letter to his Father” is “one of the most consistent applications of Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex to one particular life” (Sokel 146, emphasis added). This problem of confusing latent and manifest content, application and unconscious emergence, has lead to the problem, as Margret Schaefer notes, that “[p]sychoanalytic criticism has by and large followed Kafka’s
lead and has read his life and works through the lens of his own oedipal construction of himself” (52).

Should psychoanalytic criticism regard Kafka’s conscious “construction” of Oedipal texts as insights into Kafka’s psyche? To what degree should his fiction be read autobiographically? And shall we consider the letter to the father fact or fiction? As Freud noted in The Interpretation of Dreams: “Two interpretations are not mutually contradictory, but both cover the same ground; they are a good instance of the fact that dreams, like all other psychopathological structures, regularly have more than one meaning” (Freud 182). While it is certainly debatable whether writing, and especially Kafka’s writing, may be considered a “psychopathological structure,” the multiplicity of textual interpretations in literature is not. Kafka himself notes this multiplicity in his explication of the parable of the doorkeeper in The Trial: “The commentators tell us: the correct understanding of a matter and misunderstanding the matter are not mutually exclusive” (219). By no means should the charged relationship between Kafka and his father be completely discounted; likewise, we certainly ought not to marginalize Kafka’s life from his texts by regarding the two as separate entities, by trying to understand one without the other. However, to leave it at Oedipus neglects any latent interpretations of the works or other psychoanalytic approaches that might be employed in the attempt to understand better Kafka and his writing.

The problem I find in a strong fidelity to the Oedipal interpretation is that it facilitates the tendency to reduce Kafka’s work to escapism or catharsis: Kafka can confront his father in a multitude of textual situations in a manner in which he was presumably unwilling or unable to do in speech—this certainly appears to be the case in the “Letter to his Father.” In fact, much of the difficulty in moving away from Kafka’s father as “central” to...
interpretations of his work is due to Kafka’s stance in the “Letter”: “My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast” (177). But was this truly the case, or is this a rhetorical exaggeration employed by Kafka towards enhancing “the whole effect I hope for from this letter” (165)? The question reverberates: shall we treat the letter as fact or fiction? It may help to begin with an example of the magnified role Hermann Kafka often receives in criticism.

Harry Brand’s essay, “Kafka’s Creative Crisis,” serves as a good example of an incorrect interpretation of Kafka’s work, “The Judgment,” as informed by the Oedipus complex—though it is only “incorrect” in the sense put forth by Blanchot that “[a] correct reading [of Kafka] is out of the question. . . . Any reader of Kafka is thus forced to become a liar and yet not quite a liar” (23). Brand asserts that “[c]entral to an understanding of Kafka as a man and an artist is an understanding of his relationship to his overbearing father” (250). Again, while this relationship should not be discounted, is it truly “central”? And if not, then what is central, and who’s to say? The truth in Blanchot’s statement becomes more apparent.

Brand goes on to interpret “The Judgment” highly autobiographically, where Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld is Felice Bauer, the father is Kafka’s father, and Kafka is represented by both Georg and the friend in Russia. Georg represents Kafka’s urges and desires for domesticity, and the exiled friend represents Kafka’s creative side. And this certainly seems plausible—some of these relationships were mentioned by Kafka himself in his diary—until one attempts to view the father as “an oedipal tyrant” (Brand 255). Though Georg may be taking the father’s place in running the business, oddly, in this Oedipal drama, the mother is absent, through death; one part of the triangle necessary for the Oedipal conflict is thus
removed from it. So perhaps it is the case that another character takes the place of the mother in the triangle, and, informed by this notion, two possible situations arise.

The first is that the “standard Oedipal drama” is inverted, where the father becomes the jealous son, and Georg becomes the father. There is the tender bedside rapport when Georg carries his father to bed and tucks him in, like a father would his son, and the father’s childish way (though certainly terrifying in context) of jumping up on the bed, then later flinging himself down upon it again. Also, the father becomes the envious one, envious that Georg’s soon-to-be wife is not dead (as his wife is), and that Georg was handed a successful business to maintain rather than having to build one. And finally there is the father’s inverted-oedipal utterance: “Just take your bride on your arm and try getting in my way! I’ll sweep her from your very side, you don’t know how!” (“The Judgment” 86). So then Frieda becomes the mother in the inverted Oedipal drama. Perhaps.

The friend in Russia might be the other viable substitute for the mother. Kafka himself noted that: “The friend is the link between father and son, he is their strongest common bond” (11 Feb. 1913), just as in any father-mother-child relationship, the mother is the “strongest common bond” between father and child, at least biologically speaking. The exiled friend, after all, is what Georg and his father fight over. His father passionately defends the friend, “a son after my own heart” (85). In Brand’s reading, the father becomes “Kafka’s artistic muse” (259), who, by vicariously killing Georg and thus Kafka’s domestic illusions, enables Kafka’s artistic self. Perhaps. This would fit in with the interpretation that Kafka’s writing was always about his father, but, again, Kafka’s statement that his writing was entirely about his father should be viewed somewhat suspiciously.
However, neither of these manifest Oedipal interpretations account for the strangely maternal role Georg himself takes on. The inverted Oedipal interpretation most closely approaches the problem, where at least Georg’s parental role is addressed. The difference arises in a relatively minor detail when Georg tries to lay his father down onto his bed: “. . . the old man on his breast was playing with his watch chain. He could not lay him down on the bed for a moment, so firmly did he hang on to the watch chain” (84). The inverted paternal relationship remains, but, strangely and subtly due to the detail of the watch chain qua umbilicus, it becomes a maternal relationship. Another more generally parental (as opposed to specifically maternal) detail is in Georg’s chiding himself at the sight of his father’s dirty underwear “for having been neglectful” of his duties (84), as though the father were unable to care for himself or would not know better than to change his soiled or otherwise dirty underpants, like an infant or a small child. Elsewhere, Georg assumes blame for his father’s condition and encourages him as one might encourage a sick child:

“You just take a bite of breakfast instead of properly keeping up your strength. You sit by a closed window, and the air would be so good for you. No, Father! I’ll get the doctor to come, and we’ll follow his orders. We’ll change your room, you can move into the front room and I’ll move in here. You won’t notice the change, all your things will be moved with you. But there’s time for all that later, I’ll put you to bed now for a little, I’m sure you need to rest. Come, I’ll help you to take off your things, you’ll see I can do it. Or if you would rather go into the front room at once, you can lie down in my bed for the present. That would be the most sensible thing.” (83)
This reinforces both Georg’s parental role and his father’s role as the irresponsible, unwitting, or incapable child.

This role reversal utterly confounds a straightforward Oedipal reading of “The Judgment,” so we must look beyond Oedipus. Kafka knew about Freud, “knew these [Freudian] theories very well and considered them always as a very rough and ready explanation which didn’t do justice to detail, or rather to the real heartbeat of the conflict” (Brod 20), so Kafka’s stories must be treated as, at best, distorted applications of the Oedipus. As Margret Schaefer points out, it might be beneficial for us to interpret Kafka’s work using an approach that “requires fewer tortuous mental acrobatics” than approaches such as my previous example of attempting to reconcile the dual roles the characters assume in “The Judgment.” “Contemporary developments in psychoanalysis . . . have vastly enlarged the scope of the phenomena that psychoanalysis is competent to explain and have greatly enriched our understanding of psychological states that are inadequately or too tortuously addressed by the use of the oedipal model” (Schaefer 57).

It is of note that, even in the attempt to move away from Oedipal interpretations (Deleuze and Guattari, Schaefer, among others), we continually return to Oedipus, in a classic instance of discoursive framing. Attempts to think not of an elephant, to use Lakoff’s example, have rendered elephantine the Oedipus complex in Kafka, looming almost as large and imposing a figure as Kafka’s own portrayals of his father. So rather than disregard or attempt to negate these interpretations as misinterpretations, perhaps it would be worthwhile to confront the temptation to interpret the Oedipus complex into Kafka head on—to move beyond Oedipus by first delving deeper into Oedipus, and, in the vein of Schaefer’s article, to
examine Oedipus not through the Freudian lens Kafka had seen through, but rather, through a lens informed by post-Freudian psychoanalysis.

Lacan, in his “return to Freud,” recognizes the import of the Oedipus complex in his theory of the development of consciousness and the self, though he interprets it quite differently than Freud. Informed by structural linguistics, Lacan argues that the Oedipus complex no longer becomes a narrow application of the Greek legend, but rather, it becomes emblematic of man’s acquisition of language. Specifically, Lacan split the psyche into three realms or orders: the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. In the Real, the infant cannot separate his “self” from the world around him, and the mother satisfies the infant’s primal needs. In the imaginary realm, the child begins to recognize his own image, through the (mis)recognition of his “self” in the mirror. Lacan’s idea of the so-called “mirror stage” is central to his theory of the development of consciousness and self, since this fundamental misrecognition sets up the rift between self and otherness by misrecognizing self as otherness; this misrecognition becomes irreconcilable and will characterize the neurosis of the human condition. Finally, there is the symbolic order, which marks the subject’s entrance into language and, consequentially, the entrance into a wholly constructed selfhood. Once the individual enters the symbolic order, he is irreversibly divorced from the Real, and the Real becomes “impossible.”

Lacan integrates the Oedipus complex into this concept of self-development through the child’s growing acknowledgment of a lack, which begins in the shift from the realm of the Real to the imaginary order. The individual begins to recognize the mother, the fulfiller of his primal needs, as something separate from himself, and he wishes (a “demand,” as opposed to a “need”) to merge again with her as he experienced in the Real. (Incidentally, as
the acknowledgment of a lack grows, so, too, does the child’s immersion into language.)

Thus the mother represents not only the biological mother, but also the initial unified feeling of existence characteristic of the Real, where “self” and “other” are as yet undefined. The father, on the other hand, comes to represent language and law, the Phallus, by way of what Lacan termed the “Name of the Father.” This submission to the Name of the Father marks the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order, where demand transforms into desire. It is through the father—the Name of the Father, the individual’s entrance into language—that the subject’s desire is forever frustrated, and the subject is kept from merging again with, from symbolically having, the mother.

*The Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”*

With this Lacanian refocusing or remapping of the Oedipus complex onto language, it behooves us to look at Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” since the world of Kafka is not only one of letters as language, but it is a world littered with letters as epistles. In the seminar, Lacan examines Poe’s short story in which the Minister implicitly ransoms the Queen through the theft of her letter. The possession of this letter places him in a position of authority over the Queen due to its dubious contents, which implicate her in some sort of affair or illegitimate pact, presumably against the King. Lacan argues that it is not so much the possession of the physical letter which grants power, but the subject’s place in the “symbolic chain” or “the intersubjective triad.” This triad consists of three positions: the one who does not see, the one who sees that the other does not see and believes himself to be unseen, and the one who sees both the non-seer and the seer.
The story begins with the King as the one who does not see (the letter, which the queen tries to hide); the queen sees that he does not see; and the Minster sees her precarious situation and seizes the opportunity to steal the letter, since the queen is in no position to challenge him with the King still at her side. Throughout the story, characters shift between these three positions due to shifting knowledge of the letter. After the theft of the letter, the queen becomes the one who does not see the letter, since the Prefect of police, acting as her agent, unsuccessfully searches for the letter for eighteen months. Thus, the Minister becomes the one who sees that the Queen (via the Prefect) does not see the letter and believes himself to be unseen, and Dupin, the sleuth who eventually finds the letter, dons the role previously filled by the Minister in seeing both the seer and the non-seer.

Lacan uses “The Purloined Letter” as an example to explain Freud’s “repetition automatism” and the idea that the unconscious is structured like a language—“namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of the letter” (STPL 29). Again, it is not the letter which grants power over the subject, but the subject’s place in the symbolic chain: “[t]he heart of the matter … is simply the primacy of the signifier over the subject” (Muller and Richardson 67).

Aside from the central role of the letter in both stories, “The Judgment” shares other similarities with “The Purloined Letter,” as interpreted by Lacan. “The Purloined Letter” is narrated through multiple filters—the story is told by the narrator, through the Prefect, who is told by the Queen of the letter and its (never specified) contents. Lacan notes of the multiplicity of the narration: “The fact that the message is thus retransmitted [so many times] assures us of what may by no means be taken for granted: that it belongs to the dimension of
language” (STPL 35). In “The Judgment,” Kafka does not use multiple narrative filters so much as he uses the narrator and Georg to repeat the central problem as perceived by Georg at the beginning of the story—that he has not been truthful with his emigrant friend, or more specifically, that he has been misleading in his letters to him. The story begins with Georg having finished composing the letter; the narrator then tells the story that led to the writing of the letter; he quotes the letter; and finally, Georg discusses it with his father. Going back to Lacan, these narrative iterations affirm the unmistakable “linguistic dimension” (35) that characterizes Georg’s situation.

Georg and the Return of the Repressed

In thinking, then, of Kafka, Lacan, and their worlds of letters, it is interesting to think of the purloined letters in the Kafkan world—“purloined,” that is, in the etymological sense that Lacan describes in the seminar: “a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been prolonged, (etymologically, the word of the title), or . . . a letter in sufferance” (STPL 43, Lacan’s emphasis). Kafka’s letter to his father failed to reach Hermann, and, in “The Judgment,” Georg never does mail the letter to his emigrant friend, committing suicide with it still in his pocket, presumably. One is tempted to ask whether Kafkan letters ever arrive at their destination. Of course, we can cheat by applying Lacan’s conclusion from the seminar: “a letter always arrives at its destination” (STPL 53). But having arrived at the conclusion, the course of this arrival must be explained.

Georg begins the story in the second position of the “intersubjective triad,” the one originally filled by the Queen in “The Purloined Letter,” then later filled by the Minister and finally Dupin (that is, once he replaces the letter with a spiteful facsimile). This is the
position of the one who sees that the other does not see, but fails to suspect that he himself is seen. That is, Georg sees that his friend in Russia does not “see” the truth because of the misleading letters he has been sending him; however, Georg mistakenly believes that only he and his friend exist in this intersubjective relationship—he fails to believe or even conceive that he is “seen not seeing.”

Interestingly, Lacan attributes a distinct femininity to this second position, “so propitious to the act of concealing” (STPL 44). After all, this is the role the queen fills in the “primal scene” of the story, to use Lacan’s description. The Minister then assumes the Queen’s role by stealing her letter, her “sign,” and “exude[s] the oddest odor di feminia when [Dupin] appears” in his office (STPL 48). When Dupin assumes the second position, his vengeful act against the Minister (rather than leaving a blank, anonymous facsimile) is described by Lacan as “a rage of manifestly feminine nature” (STPL 51); moreover, Lacan argues that this act is less a result of Dupin’s character or his vengeful desire than it is a consequence of his assuming the second position in the triad (in the case where the psychoanalyst/reader assumes the third position). In this light, now the parental details of Georg—ranging from the curious detail of the watch chain qua umbilicus to Georg’s carrying him to bed and the more general parental self-criticism over his father’s condition—can be seen as distinctly maternal, since he occupies this feminine second position in the “symbolic chain” at this point in the story.

After accounting for Georg’s assumed femininity, we are still left with the early characterization of his father as a powerless infant, soiling himself and being carried to bed. Of course, this can be viewed simply as a manifestation of Georg’s misrecognition of or incorrect assumptions about his father, but the image of the father allowing Georg to carry
him to bed, *participating* in his portrayal as an infant, seems to confound this interpretation. Undeniably, his father represents the phallus and the Name-of-the-Father, but the combination of the power of his word (through his judgment, his *sentencing* of Georg) at the end of the story with these early images of him as helpless infant should not be dismissed as a simple ruse of his in setting up the pending assault on Georg. Rather, this dual characterization of Georg’s father as impotent infant and omnipotent (and omniscient) authority suggests the tension existing between the Real and the symbolic. Lacan’s three psychic structures, after all, are not mutually exclusive of each other, but coexist in tension.

The friend, likewise, assumes a dual characterization—that of the imaginary and the symbolic. He represents the imaginary in that he truly exists in the narrative only as Georg’s narcissistic projection, his “fantasy formation.” In his analysis of Charlie Chaplin’s *City Lights*, a somewhat analogous situation, Slavoj Žižek notes of Chaplin’s delays in filming caused by his attempts to include the anonymous rich man in the diegesis of the film: “…the rich man didn’t have to exist at all, that it was enough for him to be the poor girl’s fantasy formation, i.e., that in reality, one person (the tramp) was enough. This is also one of the elementary insights of psychoanalysis. In the network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other’s symbolic structure” (EYS 5). The friend fills this same role of nonexistence (or implied existence, at best) in “The Judgment.”

Georg’s father even specifically draws attention to this fact by questioning the existence of the friend in Russia when Georg first approaches him about the problem: “Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?”, his father asks (CS 82). The friend’s existence, his knowledge of the true nature of Georg’s lies, is not what drives Georg to
suicide; it is the Father’s knowledge, the Father’s spoken condemnation, the sentence of the Father, which drives Georg out of the house and towards his death. Whether the friend knows—or even exists at all—is not the issue.

While one tries to identify others with a “certain fantasy place” within his own symbolic structure, by extension he places himself in a certain (equally fantastic) place within that same symbolic structure — the place of “self,” the “ideal ego” in Lacanian terminology. Returning to the concept of the mirror stage, this image or place of “self” is based on the subject’s appearance to others and to himself as an other. The subject also projects himself into fantasy roles within his own assumptions (projections) of the other’s symbolic structure based on his own assumptions about himself, his own view of his “self.” Georg’s tragedy is thus the realization that the image of self in his own symbolic structure—that he is a good son, a good friend—is shattered; simultaneously, he realizes the narcissistic projection he has made of himself in both his father’s and his friend’s symbolic structures of being a good son and a good friend respectively was his own illusion which did not correlate at all to their respective identifications of Georg. He views himself from the “ego ideal” and recognizes the disparity between his ideal ego and the ego ideal. The friend represents the imaginary through his non-materiality or non-corporeality in the narrative of the story, along with Georg’s egregious narcissistic projections about him. His association with letters, through both Georg’s fictive letters to him, his father’s clandestine letters exposing the deception, and his subsequent alignment with Georg’s father (as representative of the symbolic) in continuing the ruse against Georg, thus makes him represent the symbolic as well.
With the father representing the tension between the Real and the symbolic and the friend representing the imaginary and the symbolic, it is tempting—if simply for the sake of symmetry—to claim that Georg represents the Real and the Imaginary. But this would ignore the role of Georg’s own letter in his demise and thus deny his active immersion in the symbolic. Instead, Georg represents the Lacanian subject as constituted by these three psychical structures. So the letter that Georg writes represents his immersion in the symbolic; his incorrect and narcissistic perceptions of others and their feelings towards him represent the imaginary; but what of the Real?

 Appropriately, the Real both begins and ends the story for Georg. In the opening paragraph, we find Georg, after finishing the letter to his friend, “gazing out of the window at the river” (CS 77, emphasis added). This allows me to introduce Lacan’s concept of the Gaze. It is a gaze, of sorts, that marks the infant’s initial break with the Real during the mirror stage, a gaze which misrecognizes the “self” as unified and defines this “self” based on otherness. The Gaze also meant for Lacan:

 the uncanny sense that the object of our eye's look or glance is somehow looking back at us of its own will. This uncanny feeling of being gazed at by the object of our look affects us in the same way as castration anxiety (reminding us of the lack at the heart of the symbolic order). We may believe that we are in control of our eye's look; however, any feeling of scopophilic power is always undone by the fact that the materiality of existence (the Real) always exceeds and undercuts the meaning structures of the symbolic order. . . . [A]t the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It is that lack at the
heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire. However, because the objet petit a (the object of our desire) is ultimately nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections, to come too close to it threatens to give us the experience precisely of the Lacanian Gaze, the realization that behind our desire is nothing but our lack: the materiality of the Real staring back at us. (Felluga “The Gaze”)

Thus Georg’s desires—that his friend be a failed businessman, ignorant of his snowballing white lies; that his father be a feeble old man; and that Georg himself be a successful businessman, kind to his father and friends—these narcissistic projections return his gaze full-force, showing the lack at the heart of the symbolic. Through the father’s revelation, Georg sees the friend in Russia in himself—all his success in life seems only an illusion created by his father—and the weak father turns out to be stronger than Georg ever imagined, even suggesting Georg’s fiancé is not truly his. His narcissistic projection of himself turns out to be more of a caricature to others than any facsimile. The success he tried to hide from his friend, mired in failure, was illusory, and Georg thus sees himself truly mired in failure.

But this failure is not merely commercial or social failure; it is the failure of life itself—death—which confronts Georg at the end of the story. And it is his letter, his father (thus the Name of the Father and the symbolic), his signifier which hastens this revelation, this returned Gaze. “You realize, of course,” Lacan writes in the “Seminar,” “that our intention is not . . . to confuse the letter with the spirit, even if we receive the former by pneumatic dispatch, and that we readily admit that one kills whereas the other quickens, insofar as the signifier—you perhaps begin to understand—materializes the agency of death” (STPL 38, emphasis added). This then, is the connection between the symbolic and the Real, between
the Gaze and the Gaze returned, between Georg’s suicide and the events leading up to it. The father’s judgment becomes the Gaze returned, and it is at this point that Georg is faced with the materiality of his existence—the failure of life as death—and this acts as the intrusion of the Real, delivered by a representative of the Real, his father.

Georg’s confrontation with the eruption of the Real due to the return of his Gaze results in his jumping into the river, the initial object of his Gaze and archetypal symbol of both life and death—the combined materiality of the Real. It is through Georg’s realization that he in fact is the blind one—to return to Lacan’s intersubjective triad—that catalyzes his suicide. Interestingly, Lacan alluded to the correlation between the first (blind) position and the real, the second (seer) position and the imaginary, and the third (robber) position and the symbolic, summarized here by Muller and Richardson:

But the term “real” here is decidedly ambiguous, for the specifically Lacanian sense (as the “impossible” to symbolize or imagize) yields in this text to a more normal usage signifying a naively empiricist objectivism that is oblivious of the role of symbolic structures in the organization of “reality.” … As for the imaginary quality of the second position, it is to be understood in terms of the narcissism (and its ruses) implied in the subject’s “seeing” but failing to see that he is seen.

What correlates the third position with the symbolic is the fact that it discerns the role of structure in the situation and acts accordingly. (63)

While the assumption of a position in the Real is ambiguous with respect to “The Purloined Letter,” in “The Judgment” we see a closer approximation of it through the concept of the Gaze. Once Georg has heard his sentence, has been confronted with both his personal failures
and the failure of life as death (the failure of the symbolic’s meaning structures, undermined by the Real), he seems almost inescapably drawn—one is tempted to say “fated”—toward the object of his Gaze, the river.

This seemingly inescapable fate brings us back to Žižek’s explication of Lacan’s idea that “a letter always arrives at its destination,” since one may ask: “Why does Georg bother to consult with his father? He would still be alive—albeit embarrassed or ashamed—had he simply mailed the letter.” But Žižek dismisses such hypotheticals: “‘Fate’ in psychoanalysis always asserts itself through such contingent encounters . . . Such questioning is, of course, deceitful since ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’: it waits for its moment with patience—if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fire off the trauma” (EYS 11-12, Žižek’s emphasis).

Thus, a “letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity” (EYS 13). And this is exactly the case in “The Judgment”: Georg must assume responsibility for the years of lying to his friend; then he truly becomes the addressee and recipient of the letter he wrote to his friend, since that very letter, his father reveals, is but a repetition of a letter the father has already sent the friend. Georg’s trauma is realizing that it is actually himself who is the recipient of the letter. He begins to notice this fairly early in the escalating conversation with his father, as he utters phrases before regretting them: “‘You comedian!’ Georg could not resist the retort, realized at once the harm done and, his eyes starting in his head , bit his tongue back, only too late, till the pain made his knees give” (86). And shortly thereafter:

In his enthusiasm he waved his arm over his head. “He knows everything a thousand times better!” he cried.
“Ten thousand times!” said Georg, to make fun of his father, but in his very mouth the words turned into deadly earnest. (87)

These slips of the tongue—as both utterances are explicitly associated with the mouth—reemphasize the notion that the letter is a repetition, but specifically, to use Žižek’s argument, the letter is a repetition qua the return of the repressed:

he always says more than he “intended to say,” and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content—in it, “the repressed returns.” What are symptoms qua “returns of the repressed” if not such slips of the tongue by means of which “the letter arrives at its destination,” i.e., by means of which the big Other returns to the subject his own message in its true form? (EYS 14)

The return of the repressed then combines the Gaze, the repetition of the letter, Georg’s status as the true recipient, and the fact that “a letter always arrives at its destination.” The trauma in “The Judgment” for Georg then becomes the return of the repressed. This point seems intuitive, psychoanalysis aside—Georg is faced with the return of what he tried to repress from his emigrant friend.

Žižek claims that the concept of “‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ condenses an entire chain . . . of propositions: ‘the sender always receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form,’ ‘the repressed always returns,’ ‘the frame itself is always being framed by part of its content,’ ‘we cannot escape the symbolic debt, it always has to be settled,’ which are all ultimately variations on the same basic premise that ‘there is no metalanguage.’” (EYS 12) These all eventually refer to the mortality of all individuals: “‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ equals what ‘meeting one’s fate’ means: ‘we will all
die.’ . . . the only letter that nobody can evade, that sooner or later reaches us, i.e., the letter which has each of us as its infallible address, is death” (20). The hypothetical that I previously mentioned—that Georg would have lived had he simply mailed the letter—is inconsequential, since this letter, the letter containing his “death warrant” (EYS 21), could have never failed to reach Georg. That Georg commits suicide after he receives his letter in reverse form—he receives from the father the letter which he wrote to his friend—merely shows him “paying his symbolic debt.”

The Father and Worse: Georg Between Two Deaths

Georg’s father delivers the verdict at the story’s climax: “And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!” (87). This is Georg’s death in the symbolic order, his first death. At this point in the story, the “sublime beauty” of the void between the two deaths emerges, and I argue it is in this void space where the uncanniness of the Kafkaesque lives. Georg’s father has, until now, been the central source of the sense of uncanniness in the story, but once he renders his sentence, it is Georg’s uncanny execution of this sentence that concludes the story. Admittedly, Georg’s uncanniness here remains a function of the father, yet what is surprising, and what cannot necessarily be attributed to the father, is the speed with which Georg carries out the sentence along with the seemingly automatic nature in which he does it. By the end of the following paragraph, he has released himself from the bridge, leaving only one brief sentence in the text before the end of the story.

I previously quoted Žižek’s claim that the space between the two deaths is one “of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters” (SOI 135). To be clear, I interpret this sublimity in a Burkean sense, as what may inspire awe, fright, dread, or terror. I depart from
Burke, however, in the exclusivity he attributes to the sublime and the beautiful; therefore, “sublime beauty” and “terrifying monsters” are not necessarily mutually exclusive—the beautiful is capable of (sublime) terror, and the monstrous is capable of (terrifying) beauty.¹

Antigone’s lament—which is the passage that Lacan looks at in his examination of Antigone, as well as the proper context of the previous Žižek quote—exhibits a fluctuation between opposites that manifests itself vividly in the first line of her lament: “O grave, O bridal bower, O prison house” (891). Such oscillations can be found throughout her lament, and the justification for these almost rhythmic reversals is none other than the fact that Antigone occupies the place between two deaths. Creon has just ordered her to be taken away to her tomb, to her Real death, and she is already dead to the symbolic community at that point. (Recall lines 576-7, where her death-warrant is sealed by agreement between the Chorus and Creon: “By you, as first by me.”) At this juncture, the fate that she has anticipated throughout the entire drama—since first hearing of Creon’s decree denying Polynices burial rites, she has anticipated this fate—and it is absolutely imminent. She is in the process of assuming it, of realizing it, during this speech. Antigone is awash with conflicting thoughts and emotions. And it is through oscillations such as these that I justify the interpretation of “sublime beauty” and “terrifying monsters” as being not mutually exclusive.

Lacan argues that Antigone’s beauty is associated with a limit, or rather, with her transgression of a limit: “The limit involved . . . is something I have called the phenomenon of the beautiful, it is something I have begun to define as the limit of the second death” (S7 260). As Lacan further examines this limit, he introduces what he claims is the central word

¹ For example, I would argue that Gregor Samsa exists in tension between the beautiful and the monstrous.
in *Antigone: ἄτη* or transliterated as *Atè*\(^2\) (S7 262). Lacan cites *Atè* as being repeated twenty times in the text of the drama, and he describes it as “an irreplaceable word.” He continues: “It designates the limit that human life can only briefly cross. The text of the Chorus is significant and insistent—ἐκτὸς ἄτας [beyond the limit of *Atè*]. Beyond this *Atè*, one can only spend a brief period of time, and that’s where Antigone wants to go” (S7 262-3).

Antigone wants to move beyond this limit, as Lacan says, and “it is *Atè*, or fate as a suffering imposed on one, that moves one beyond these limits . . . [O]ur fate is limited to desire, a desire that remains in a fundamental relation to death, to what Freud came to call the death drive” (Gasperoni “Driven to Death”).

In examining the relationship between *Atè* and the death drive, I must first clarify the apparently circular logic of needing *Atè* to go beyond *Atè*. What allows Antigone to transgress the limit of *Atè* is not that she simply chooses to do it. Rather, this *Atè* is the mark of the Labdacides family; it is their “misfortune,” their “doom,” their “bewilderment . . . caused by blindness . . . sent by the gods.” In short this *Atè* is the family’s “fate as suffering.” Thus, it is by the fate of her family that Antigone can go beyond *Atè*, “beyond the limits of the human” (S7 263).

This “fate as suffering” brings to mind Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” specifically the concluding sentence: “This is why what the ‘purloined letter,’ nay, the ‘letter en souffrance,’ means is that a letter always arrives at its destination” (ÉC 30/41).\(^3\) This sentence basically repeats Lacan’s earlier examination of the etymology of “purloined”:

\(^2\) *Atè* can be defined in a number of ways, from “misfortune” to “fate” or “doom.” Another meaning of *Atè* (among still many more) is “to be in a state of bewilderment or infatuation caused by blindness or delusions sent by the gods as the punishment of guilty rashness” (Gasperoni “Antigone”).

\(^3\) I have turned here to Fink’s translation of the seminar. His translation of this sentence in particular is more graceful than the Mehlman translation found in Muller and Richardson’s *The Purloined Poe: “Thus it is that what the ‘purloined letter,’ nay, the ‘letter in sufferance,’ means is that a letter always arrives at its destination*” (STPL 53).
“prolonged . . . or, to revert to the language of the post office, a letter in sufferance” (STPL 43). The passage that relates this entire seminar to the idea of Atè as “fate as suffering” appears several paragraphs later when Lacan writes: “If what Freud discovered and rediscovers with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindness, in their end and in their fate . . . If it [the signifier, the letter] be ‘in sufferance,’ they shall endure the pain” (SPTL 43-4, Lacan’s emphasis).

For Antigone, the displaced signifier is this Atè, her family’s “fate as suffering,” and indeed it is they who endure the pain. Thus Lacan writes:

Antigone appears . . . as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose him.

Anything at all may be invoked in connection with this, and that’s what the Chorus does in the fifth act when it evokes the god that saves.

Dionysos is this god; otherwise why would he appear there? There is nothing Dionysiac about the act and the countenance of Antigone. Yet she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire. (S7 282)

Lacan’s introduction of Dionysos here refers to the Chorus’s song after Antigone is finally expelled (what Lacan refers to as “the fifth act”). The Chorus invokes “an enigmatic reference to three quite disparate episodes from the history of mythology” (S7 281): Danae, whose imprisonment parallels Antigone’s fate; and the latter two examples are Lycurgus and
Phineas, whose respective myths both bear some relation to Dionysos. (An interesting detail to keep in mind is the invocation in “The Judgment” of “the god that saves”—the charwoman cries “Jesus!” as Georg flies down the stairs. Antigone wants to assume her signifier, not be saved; the same may be said of Georg.)

Lacan argues that Antigone’s choice is not a moral or ethical (sacrificial) protest against the injustice of Creon’s refusal to grant Polynices burial rites. Antigone’s choice is simply to assume the signifier, the Atè which defines her family in the symbolic order. At the beginning of the drama, Antigone offers Ismene the option to do the same, but Ismene rejects (or perhaps more appositely: she prolongs) her Atè so that she may continue to exist within the symbolic order, which for her means literally to live in Creon’s house.

I began this tangent on Lacan’s reading of Antigone in order to explain his idea of the two deaths. The points most relevant to my examination of Kafka and “The Judgment” are of course the two deaths, the beautiful, the death drive, the signifier, and fate or Atè (insofar as it embodies repetition qua the return of the repressed).

Georg enters the realm between two deaths, and thus the realm of “sublime beauty,” once his father announces his sentence. However, in stark contrast to Antigone, Georg offers no long lament, in which critics have typically located Antigone’s beauty. However, Georg does express a sense of grief, remorse, or sorrow in his brief apology to his parents, which may be construed as a lament of sorts, though its pathos certainly is not found in its length, as is the case with Antigone’s extended lamentation. Yet despite the speed—or rather, because of the terrifying speed—with which Kafka thrusts Georg through this sphere between the two deaths (both in terms of Georg’s sprint to the bridge and also in terms of the narrative economy), the conclusion of “The Judgment” retains a comparable “sublime beauty” to
Antigone’s. The speed heightens the abundant uncertainty of the story, and it is this uncertainty that manifests the “sublime beauty” of Georg’s passage between two deaths:

The moving side of beauty causes all critical judgment to vacillate, stops analysis, and plunges the different forms involved into certain confusion, or rather, an essential blindness.

The beauty effect is a blindness effect. Something else is going on on the other side that cannot be observed. In effect, Antigone herself has been describing from the beginning: “I am dead and I desire death.” When Antigone depicts herself as Niobe becoming petrified, what is she identifying herself with, if it isn’t the inanimate condition in which Freud taught us to recognize the form in which the death instinct is manifested? An illustration of the death instinct is what we find here. (S7 281)

As with Antigone, Georg’s demise is none other than an illustration of the death instinct. Kafka carefully allows Georg not a single word of protest after the father passes judgment. Instead, one only finds the irresistible lure of the bridge, of death, of Até. “Beyond a certain point there is no return,” Kafka writes in the Octavo notebooks. “This point has to be reached” (BON Aphorism 5). Georg certainly reaches this point.

The Forced Choice and Desire (of the Other): The Father and Worse (Redux)

When Georg is presented with the forced choice at the end of the story, it is not the choice as formulated by Lacan of “le père ou pire”—“the father or worse,” a choice between bad and worse. The forced “choice” confronting Georg is not the repetition of the initial forced choice faced by the (infant) subject—that is, the choice between submission to or
rejection of the symbolic (and thus exclusion from the symbolic community in the form of either psychosis or death) (EYS 75). Submission to the symbolic mandate and rejection of the symbolic here have the same effect: Georg’s death.

Georg’s father bears no legal or “official” authority, per se. As such, Georg hypothetically has the “option” to reject the father’s judgment without being rejected by the community at large. But upon closer inspection, his existence in the symbolic order is entirely and completely mediated through his father. His employment and success at the business is arranged by the father (“finishing off deals that I had prepared for him” [86]). His emigrant friend—the only “friend” [Freund] he mentions in the story, save the “acquaintance” [Bekannten]—is aligned with the father. And even his fiancé appears only to fulfill that role at the beck and call of the father (86). Essentially, his entire life is based on the mediation of his father, so rejection by the father is, in a way, a rejection by the entire symbolic community.

Another way of looking at the “father or worse” choice Georg faces at the end of “The Judgment” is through the lens of desire. After all, what makes submission to the father “bad” is that “the subject ‘gives way as to his desire,’ and thus contracts an indelible guilt” (EYS 75). On the subject of desire, Lacan famously argues that “man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (S11 38), which is why to give way to one’s desire is to submit to the Father. Kafka himself seems concerned with similar thoughts regarding desire, as one can see in the aphorisms: “The animal wrests the whip from its master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master’s whiplash” (BON aphorism 29*). The subject’s desire “is to desire what the big Other desires and as the big Other desires. But it is also to desire the desire of the big Other, to become that
object that incites desire in the big Other. For the subject to be caught in the trajectory of becoming the big Other’s object cause of desire is to be trapped in the death drive” (Gasperoni “Driven to Death”).

It is around the objet petit a—the object cause of desire—that the subject circles, chasing objects of desire which are essentially metonymic, since realizing or possessing one of these objects cannot satiate desire (Evans 125). Similar to the purloined letter in Poe’s story, an object of desire loses its efficacy once used or realized. The objet petit a “plays a unique role in the construction of fantasy and the determination of linguistically structured subjectivity. It is at the junction of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real and it represents a point of impossibility; it is unknowable yet it has effects” (Marks 128).

For Georg, then, the objet petit a is the father. That is why the “option” to reject the father’s judgment never appears in the text and why Lacan’s “the father or worse” formulation becomes the non-choice, “the father and worse.” Georg desires what the father desires and as the father desires; his desire is the desire of the Other. Nowhere is this more clear than in Georg’s fantasy formation, where he sees himself as the benevolent son and steadfast friend. Presumably, the symbolic Son and symbolic Friend act as Georg believes himself to be acting. When the father reveals how far short Georg is of these symbolic mandates and then presents Georg with the final symbolic mandate—that the symbolic debt be repaid, the account settled—Georg, whose desires are inextricably entwined in the desire of the Other, sees the mandate as an ability to realize the desire of the Other. “The father or worse”—the symbolic or the Real, the community or expulsion—is clearly not the choice confronting Georg at the end. For Georg, to “choose” one necessarily entails the realization of the other.
The Trial and the “Significant Insistence”

If the symbolic function functions, we are inside it. And I would even say—we are so far into it that we can’t get out of it. – Lacan

In his biography on Kafka, Ernst Pawel discusses the notion that The Trial is essentially a novel about language. He argues that:

[The Trial] casts a spell that transcends crude analogies, [it is] an intimation, however vaguely perceived, of the ineffable beneath the opaque surface of language.

For, in the final analysis, the novel is language, and language has been a matter of life and death among Jews ever since the errant desert tribe smashed its idols and enshrined instead the word as its God. To live and die as a member of the tribe meant strict observance of the word of God become law. Transgressors died a lone death in the desert, outcasts twice over, attended by vultures.

Obedience to the spirit of the law presupposes knowledge of its letter. But knowledge breeds doubt, and as the letter of the law began yielding up the infinite ambiguities of its spirit, interpretation became the task of a lifetime, an endless “process” to which each generation contributed its share, expanding and refining the interpretations of the previous ones, heaping comment upon commentary ad infinitum, a way of life by which reason seeks to justify faith. (323, emphases added)
The connection between language, text, and Judaism is an especially apt one, given the interpretive aporia of the texts of both Kafka and Judaism.

One can see, furthermore, the import of language throughout the novel, but perhaps the most apparent and important example—as far as K. is concerned—is the petition he wishes to submit to the court. K. believes he can exculpate himself by authoring the entire story of his life, a process (Proceß) he desires to undertake and even makes small gestures toward, yet it is a process in which he never succeeds. In this sense, *The Trial* may be read as the analytic situation *par excellence* in that the subject must narrate his history to the Other. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, analysis ends when the subject can narrate his history to the Other: “What we teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history” (ÉS 52/261).

The trial itself is the symptom, the return of the repressed, not only because it is the source of distress to which K. seeks a remedy, but also because, as explained by Titorelli, the best of any possible outcomes entails the trial’s continual reemergence throughout the defendant’s life. The punishment (*qua* the symptom) is in search of the crime (*qua* trauma). The irony of *The Trial*—an irony Kafka surely would have enjoyed, given his skepticism towards psychoanalysis—is precisely the fact that the subject can never successfully narrate his history, a “therapeutic pessimism” (Brown 81) that emerges by implication in Freud’s conception of the death instinct. Kafka writes of K.’s desire to narrate his history in a petition to the court: “One needn’t be particularly faint of heart to be easily persuaded of the impossibility of ever finishing the petition. Not because of laziness or deceit . . . but because

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1 Recall that Lacan writes: “The first symbol in which we recognize man in its vestiges is the burial, and death as a means can be recognized in every relation in which *man is born into the life of his history*” (RD 101/319, emphasis added).
his entire life, down to the smallest actions and events, would have to be called to mind, described, and examined from all sides. And what a sad job that was” (127).

That it was “a sad job” brings to mind another remark Lacan made with respect to the analytic situation: “[the subject’s question] concerns his history in as much as he fails to recognise [méconnaît] it, and that is what his entire behaviour really does express in spite of himself, in so far as he tries obscurely to recognise it. His life is oriented according to a problematic which isn’t that of his actual experience, but that of his destiny, namely—what does his history signify?” (S2 43). “What does his history signify?”—is this not the question K. pores over throughout the novel, starting from his arrest in the very first sentence? The remark of “what a sad job that was” answers this very question.

The Initial Trauma

The novel’s famous opening sentence—“Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.”—underscores the question of what K.’s history signifies. He has done wrong, but not “anything truly wrong.” This sentence also shows the importance attributed to language in the novel. Someone apparently has slandered K., and this act of language, this speech of another (which is to say: the speech of an Other) is enough to cause the beginning of the end for K.

This beginning of the end marks the initial trauma K. experiences, what I will call (in a rough and ready sense) the primal scene of the novel. To call it the “primal scene” is not completely out of the realm of the psychoanalytic sense of the phrase, though it is a primal scene less in the Freudian sense than in a Lacanian sense. The subject’s perception of violence is not based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the parents’ sexual intercourse,
but is based on the misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*) which characterizes the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order. To be sure, this is not the mirror-stage *méconnaissance* based on the Gaze which precedes an infant’s entrance into the symbolic. Rather, the trauma of this primal scene is K.’s encounter with the Law and his unexpected immersion into the symbolic order. K.’s passage into the symbolic, of course, is contingent upon his castration in the sense that he lacks the Phallus and Authority, which belong to the Name of the Father and the symbolic order in general. The *méconnaissance*, therefore, is that K. believes himself to still have both the Phallus and the Authority. It is from this narcissistic position, where K. believes himself to be (generally) free of guilt, that he will come to “[find] himself to be no more than a pawn, forced inside the system, and excluded from any truly dramatic, and consequently tragic, participation in the realisation of truth” (S2 168). This suggests the possibility that, in the final chapter, K. begins to realize the futility of the task demanded of him—as a writer, aspiring writer, or most appropriately: a person forced (by the symbolic) into aspiring to write (his history) in order to achieve salvation, acquittal, vindication, or justification. K.’s final submission, therefore, may not be an admission of guilt, but a realization of his position as pawn of the Law, the symbolic, and language. In a similar sense, John McGowan notes: “Once pulled into this system, the individual has no choice but to play his role, to act out the part assigned him, thus insuring the maintenance of equilibrium in the whole. All human change, all human temporality, is merely an isolated phenomenon in a world that is unchanging and eternal” (3).

Before moving on from the primal scene, though it seems obvious I would be remiss to gloss over the constitutive role of this scene in the novel. In light of Freud’s concept of the compulsion to repeat, this scene is the trauma which K. will spend the remainder of the novel
trying to master or work through. Mark Anderson points out the proleptic nature of the novel’s beginning which instantiates K.’s entire relation to the court (158). He describes the arrest as “a scene of reading” where K. is unable to interpret the textuality of the wardens’ clothes and facial expressions, and he asserts that “[n]othing will ever deviate from this pattern. K. will never see anything more of the Court than this man’s impenetrable clothing and facial expressions, will never receive a response to his most basic and legitimate question: Who are you?” (Anderson 159). Anderson goes so far as to describe this scene as “almost a rape”—an “impression . . . reinforced by the prurient interest both [fully-clothed] warders take in K.’s ‘fancy underwear’” (161).

Indeed K. exhibits signs of guilt often characteristic of victims of trauma as he laments to Frau Grubach: “If I’d just gotten up the moment I awoke [. . . ]; if I’d eaten breakfast in the kitchen for once [. . . ]; if I’d behaved sensibly, nothing more would have happened, everything else would have been nipped in the bud” (23). But in the very next sentence, these scenarios, wherein K. would have escaped the trauma, quickly transform into outright aggression: “At the bank, for instance, I’m always prepared, nothing like this could ever happen to me there; . . . it would be a positive pleasure to confront a situation like this at my office” (23). Through the “unpleasure” of mentally reliving the experience and wanting to have avoided it, or at least “nipped [it] in the bud,” K. eventually envisions a situation where flight transforms into fight. Not only could he master the traumatic event by changing its setting, but moreover, he would become the empowered aggressor.²

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² Recall that, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, his grandson’s fort/da game leads Freud to assert that the repetition in that case represents the boy, Ernst’s, way of mastering the trauma of his mother’s absence. The throwing of the reel becomes the defiant, aggressive gesture which says: “All right, then, go away! I don’t need you. I’m sending you away myself” (15). K.’s aggressive wish here is analogous.
This desire for aggression and mastery (seen in K.’s wish for the repetition of the confrontation) immediately manifests itself in the ensuing scene with Fräulein Bürstner. Prior to her entering the house, K. is pacing in the hallway. When he realizes she is approaching, his immediate instinct is flight, and thus he runs back into his room. However, this flight instinct is soon transformed into fight in K.’s mind: “unfortunately he’d forgotten to switch on the light in his room, so that when he stepped out of the darkened room it would resemble an assault” (27, emphasis added). Rather than remaining in the hallway to greet her, K. has unconsciously put himself in a position to assume the position of an invasive power. Yet he immediately relinquishes the position by calling out to her in a manner that resembles “a plea, not a call” (27). His submissive approach continues throughout their interaction until K. wants to reenact the morning’s events.

In the reenactment, K. assumes the role of the inspector, the highest authority figure he encounters during the arrest. And this is no coincidence since, by becoming the inspector, K. is able to escape the impotence and ignorance he felt that morning. Not only does K. assume the authority of the inspector, he supplements it with the authority of a theater director:

K. placed the little table in the middle of the room and sat down behind it.

“You have to visualize the cast of characters, it’s very interesting. I’m the inspector, two guards are sitting over there on the chest, three young men are standing by the photographs. From the window handle . . . hangs a white blouse. And now the action begins.” (31)

He stages the set, blocks the characters, arranges the props, and announces when the scene is to begin, just as a director would.
The shift that occurs here—from reality to theater, from submission to dominance—requires a return to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and little Ernst’s *fort/da* game. Not only is the aggressive reversal which empowers both Ernst and K. analogous, but so is the fact that both acts are entertainment, in a way. Clearly, Ernst’s repetition is a form of entertainment. But so, too, is K.’s repetition of the “commission of inquiry” a form of entertainment, not only in its performative aspect, but also in the fact that both characters enjoy the performance—Fräulein Bürstner laughs at K., who has immersed himself in the character of inspector, a role that he perhaps has “entered too deeply” (31).

Rogers notes the importance of play as a coping mechanism in the repetition compulsion. He states that little Ernst is able to cope with his mother’s absence by gaining an “active mastery of a representation (a re-presentation) of this event in play”, that “play [is] a way of mastering anxiety” (Rogers 581). It seems hardly coincidental that K. performs this *play* largely in jest, since this allows him to dispense with the bulk of the anxiety precipitating from the arrest by making light of it. The repetition of the interrogation—not as an exact duplicate, but as a scene with a fundamentally different cast and tone—allows K. to re-p resent the trauma without being re-traumatized.

But what are we to make of the comic element of the arrest? After all, it is K. himself who calls it a “farce” in which “he was going to play along” (7), and there is even an audience watching the drama unfold from the apartment across the street. Bear in mind the reversal inherent in K.’s repetition. The scene of the arrest is so ridiculous that it seems like theater (a farce) has usurped reality. The reenactment of the arrest is also ridiculous, but when K. tries to create a theater to usurp the reality of the mornings events, he fails. Instead, reality usurps theater, piercing it—perhaps like a lance (*Lanze*)—with the loud knocking of
Grubach’s son, Lanz, in the next room. The insatiable voyeuristic audience from the morning (that sees but does not hear) reverses into a satiated voyeuristic audience (that hears but does not see).

However, both scenes are not complete opposites, or else the second could hardly be a repetition. Both share a sense of theater or drama (Drama): in the primal scene, the old woman qua audience is noted before K. encounters the guards, and of course the reenactment itself represents the theatrical in the second scene. Both scenes resemble a dream (Traum), to some extent: in the primal scene the illogic of the court’s procedures seems to coincide with the illogic of dreams, and in the second scene, the gradual dissipation of K.’s outburst seems unreal, as well as the ominous response. Finally, both scenes precipitate a trauma (Trauma): trauma is multiple in the first scene, encompassing Franz’s intrusion through the revelation that subordinates from K.’s job have been brought to witness the interrogation; in the second scene, the knocking is traumatic in that it interrupts the action of K.’s play and it startles them both as an intrusion of reality. Perhaps Kafka plays on the similarity of these words—Traum and Trauma, and Trauma and Drama—in constructing these scenes.

Memory and Forgetting, Death and Language

The register of memory plays a significant role in The Trial (along with the negative register of forgetting), and both memory and forgetting are highly relevant with respect to the repetition compulsion, the death instinct, and language, as well. In Lacan’s theory, he has a

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3 It is not coincidence that K. repeats this when he searches for the court—he knocks on the doors of various apartments in search of “a carpenter name Lanz” (40), again trying to assume the authority he previously lacked.

4 Lacan relates an anecdote of his being woken from a nap by knocking on his door in the “Tuché and Automaton” chapter in the section of The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis explaining the unconscious and repetition (56). I will discuss this in further detail below.
specific, somewhat unconventional conception of memory, as Evans notes: “For psychoanalysis, memory is the symbolic history of the subject, a chain of signifiers linked up together” (110). By locating memory in the symbolic order (and thus externally to the subject) Lacan departs from the idea of memory as understood by conventional psychology and medicine. Instead, Lacan’s conception appears somewhat closer to Plato’s discussion of knowledge and memory in the Meno, wherein knowledge is a foil of a sort of “symbolic unconscious.” Recall that in the Meno, Plato argues that knowledge is simply remembering what one learned in a previous life. That is how Plato explains the slave’s ability to follow Socrates’s argument about doubling the area of a square.

Lacan situates memory in the symbolic order due to its “insistent” quality, the same “insistence” that facilitates language and the “signifying chain.” In the discussion, Lacan describes it thusly:

If present experience presupposes reminiscence, and if reminiscence is what ensues from the experience of previous lives, then it must be the case that these experiences have also been had with the help of a reminiscence. There’s no reason why this recurrence should come to an end, which shows us that it is indeed a matter of a relation to the eternal forms. It is their awakening in the subject which explains the passage from ignorance to knowledge. In other words, one can’t know anything, if only because one already knows it. (S2 15, emphases added)

The fact that the recurrence of memories acquired in previous lives has no reason to come to an end, when considered alongside the assertion that “one can’t know anything, if only because one already knows it,” parallels the signifying chain in that there is no decisive

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5 See Lacan’s introduction to Book II of his seminar for his reading of the Meno.
beginning or end—no positive term—in the signifying chain and therefore, a word has meaning if only because other words have meaning.

In his famous study of Kafka, Walter Benjamin makes a comparable point about the nature of knowledge and the role of memory and forgetting in *The Trial*:

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 that he had forgotten. This is how Willy Haas has interpreted the course of events in *The Trial*, and justifiably so. “The object of the trial,” he writes, “indeed the real hero of this incredible book is forgetting, whose main characteristic is the forgetting of itself.” . . . What has been forgotten—and this insight affords us yet another avenue of access to Kafka’s work—is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products.

(Benjamin 131)

That what is forgotten “is never something purely individual” suggests the Lacanian conception of memory. Writing, after all, emerges from the limitations of consciousness, which is to say, it emerges from the inevitability of forgetting: what is written down may be remembered through the indelible “consciousness” of text, of the symbolic, and thus need not remain in a specific subject’s consciousness. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that text becomes an *un*consciousness, both in the sense that it lacks (organic) consciousness or
awareness, and in the sense that it becomes the repository for what can be forgotten. Omitted from the above passage are several lines where Benjamin continues to quote Haas’s comment that what makes Jehovah such an imposing figure in Judaism is precisely his infallible memory. In other words, Jehovah could be considered aliterate insofar as he has no use for text. He could be considered unconscious since what a subject may forget or repress is never truly forgotten insofar as Jehovah remembers everything; rather, the forgotten or repressed is merely prolonged in its arrival to the subject. And finally, Jehovah could be considered unconscious in the sense that (inter)subjectivity is constituted around his Word: “it was certainly the Word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is the action of our spirit that continues this creation by constantly renewing it” (RD 60/270-1, emphases added). As Deleuze states in the introduction to his study, Difference and Repetition: “It is in repetition and by repetition that Forgetting becomes a positive power” (7).

Returning to Haas’s claim that “the real hero of this incredible book is forgetting,” this can be read both literally and figuratively. In a literal way, forgetting resides at the center of the novel in that K. seems to make a habit of forgetting. We learn in the first chapter that K. “generally didn’t make it a practice to learn from experience” (7). The rest of the novel proves this to be true, as he either refuses to learn or, what is equally probable, he forgets to remember. K. receives myriad advice on his trial from multiple sources, and consistently he either rejects the advice outright or forgets to use it. (In K.’s defense, however, the motivations and veracities of the advice he receives from the various parties are uncertain at best.) Despite all advice to the contrary, K. attacks the court, bringing to mind a passage from the fourth octavo notebook: “A fight in which there is no way, at any stage, of getting
any protection for one’s back. And in spite of knowing this, one keeps on forgetting it.”
(BON 31 Jan. 1918).

The physical spaces of the court itself also underscore the importance of forgetting in
the novel. In a sense, the court as a unified entity “is nowhere in reality” (EYS 52). However,
in its disjointed actuality, it exists everywhere—in the washer woman’s apartment, in attics,
in junk closets. In other words, the court is relegated to the margins of social existence, in
places of excess or places of forgetting, both of which—returning to the idea of text as
“surplus” consciousness or unconsciousness—are essentially the same thing. This idea is
more or less articulated by Benjamin, again in his study of Kafka: “Attics are places of
discarded, forgotten objects. Perhaps the necessity to appear before a court of justice gives
rise to a feeling similar to that with which one approaches trunks in the attic which have been
locked up for years. One would like to put off this chore till the end of time” (Benjamin 133).
The analogy to psychoanalysis is obvious, whether Benjamin intended it or not, especially
considering that, on a clinical level and going all the way back to Freud, the severity of the
symptom has typically been the only thing that prevents the analysand from indefinitely
“putting off this chore” of unlocking that which has been locked away for years.

Perhaps the most stunning example of memory and forgetting in the novel comes in
the final chapter. K. seems resigned to a fate, to subjecting himself to the court’s authority
and judgment over him. Yet, as if he has forgotten his own resolution, K. becomes obstinate
and begins to resist the men: “I won’t need my strength much longer, I’ll use all I have
now,” he thought. He pictured flies, tearing their tiny legs off as the struggled to escape the
flypaper. ‘These gentlemen have their work cut out for them.’” (227). At this moment
though, the Fräulein Bürstner figure emerges, completely reverting K. to the resignation with
which he began the chapter. He decides to follow the figure, “not because he wanted to catch
up with her, and not because he wanted to keep her in sight for as long as possible, but
simply not to forget the reminder she signified for him” (227-8). Forgetting and memory
become nearly indistinguishable here, since it is completely unclear what she would remind
him of, or what about her he’d forgotten that allowed him to struggle against the court.
Whatever it may be, K.’s remembering catalyzes his death drive without question.6

Haas’s claim that forgetting is the hero could also be taken figuratively in that
forgetting qua textuality is the hero of the novel. In this sense, I will turn again for a moment
to Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”:

Like the man who withdrew to an island to forget, what? he forgot—so the
Minister, through not making use of the letter, comes to forget it. . . . But the
letter, no more than the neurotic’s unconscious, does not forget him. It forgets
him so little that it transforms him more and more in the image of her who
offered it to his capture, so that he now will surrender it, following her
example, to a similar capture. (STPL 47)

Forgetting is the hero in the sense that it is the return of the repressed. The signifier “guilty”
forgets K. so little that it transforms him into its image, with the result that he finally assumes
the signifier—whether he was guilty of the (never specified) crime or not, whether he ever
knew the law he broke or not. Forgetting has room to become the hero since, in terms of

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6 For if, as Deleuze writes, “[i]t is in repetition and by repetition that Forgetting becomes a positive power” (7),
and if “the signifier . . . materializes the agency of death” (STPL 38), then forgetting (to return to Figure 1) must
be located on the vector connecting the symbolic order and the repetition compulsion, and memory must be
located on the vector connecting the symbolic and the death drive.
characters, “Kafka’s novels have no separate hero and villain; the protagonist is hero and villain in one,” with the hero subverted by the villain” (Bridgwater 124).

Throughout, K. seems in the dark as to the true nature (and authority) of the court, since he seems to differentiate between it and the “official” or state judicial system. Despite his ignorance of this particular court and its laws, his ignorance does not imply innocence, as Lacan writes: “one of the most striking forms of interrupted discourse is the law in so far as it is not understood. By definition, no one is taken to be ignorant of the law, but it is never understood, for no one can grasp it in its entirety.” (S2 127)

The ignorance we may presume K. to have of the crime charged against him marks a point of contrast with Antigone and Lacan’s reading of that drama, previously discussed in the context of her assumption of the signifier and her existence between two deaths. In her lament between her symbolic and Real death, Antigone defies Creon, asking: “What law of heaven have I transgressed?” (921). Her question (of course rhetorical) is not meant to feign innocence or ignorance of the law; she knows full well that the law she has broken is Creon’s and not the gods’. Her question is intended to underscore the disparity between the two. K. seeks an answer to a similar question going all the way back to his arrest at the very start of the novel. Yet, from the reader’s point of view, K.’s innocence or guilt, his knowledge or ignorance of the law, is never as clear as it is with Antigone. The “true” status of his guilt or innocence remains shrouded in ambiguity. To modify Lacan slightly: he’s guilty—of what? nothing; he’s innocent—of what? nothing.

7 An idea that will not be addressed in this paper is that of K. as the Lacanian “split subject” or “divided self”—what is represented in the Lacanian algebra as the barred S: $S$. One may trace the relation “K. as $S$” to the primal scene, the point at which K. enters the symbolic order, shifting from a misrecognition of himself as the Other, as the bearer of the Phallus, to a recognition of his castration implicit in his entrance into the symbolic order. This precipitates the intense oppositions we find in K. throughout the text: for example, public/private, innocent/guilty, personal/professional, and hero/villain. Referring to the fort/da game, Lacan writes: “the mother’s departure as cause of a Spaltung [splitting] in the subject” results in the repetition of the fort/da game.
The point at which Antigone and K. do converge is the point at which they become aware of the law. Antigone, despite not knowing “what law of heaven [she has] transgressed,” finally accedes: “Well, if such justice is approved of heaven, I shall be taught by suffering my sin” (925-6, emphasis added). K., during the scene of his arrest, responds to Willem’s explanation of the law by saying: “I don’t know that law” (9). Willem subsequently responds to K. that “You’ll feel it eventually” (9, emphasis added). And recall, finally, Lacan’s assertion in the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” of the power of the signifier: “if it be ‘in sufferance,’ they shall endure the pain” (STPL 43-4, Lacan’s emphasis). Despite the myriad differences between these three texts—Antigone, The Trial, and the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”—they all share this peculiar detail, evoking the sensation of touch. This is a detail, moreover, for which Kafka had some affinity—a detail perhaps best known from “In the Penal Colony.” The individual condemned by the colony will learn “on his body” (CS 145) the sentence passed on him.

Why is it that, in these texts, guilt is never in question? Why is guilt, punishment, or one’s sentence something learned through jouissance and the realm of the Real, when it clearly functions as an agent of the symbolic order, the Law, and le non du Père? Why is it felt and not communicated through language? Persistent questions, which unfortunately go beyond the scope of the present paper.

The “Significant Insistence”: the Court is structured like a language

While the nature by which K. will learn his crime or sentence “on his body,” so to speak, remains puzzling, so, too, does the question of K.’s guilt. While the court may never waver in its certainty of K.’s guilt, the novel essentially places the reader in a position where
he has to either exculpate K. or indict him. As Stanley Corngold writes: “The more important assumption is of his guilty life before the trial, so that ambiguous behavior during the trial is counted against him. Here a rule of consistency is put into effect before the (bizarre) idea about consistency which the novel produces has been properly considered—the idea, namely, that time is only serial repetition” (Corngold 172-3, emphasis added). The suggestion that, in *The Trial*, Kafka was musing on the nature of time as constant repetition finds some support in the aphorisms, where Kafka writes:

> Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal: that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world unavoidable, the eternity of the process (or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process) nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not. (BON Aphorisms 64-5, emphasis added)

Expulsion from Paradise, of course, is predicated on humanity’s partaking of the Tree of Knowledge. In a sense, the expulsion from Eden is analogous to the subject’s entrance into the symbolic order. Yet even before the expulsion Adam and Eve were both immersed in the symbolic, since they were both subjects of God (Name of the Father), and they could speak and also desire (Genesis 3:6). An even more interesting idea is that the death instinct existed prior to mankind’s knowledge of the materiality of the Real and thus death, since both Adam and Eve eat of the Tree despite God’s explicit warning that to do so meant death. Kafka was himself interested in the relationship of knowledge to the fall, as one again finds in the aphorisms: “[N]obody can be content with knowledge alone, but must strive to act in accordance with it. . . . (This is also the meaning of the threat of death associated with the
ban on eating from the Tree of Knowledge; perhaps this is also the original meaning of natural death.)” (BON Aphorism 86). But what makes the expulsion from Paradise so interesting in relation to the symbolic order is that reading the story of the fall as such implies that existence in the symbolic precedes existence in the Real insofar as Adam and Eve do not shift from the Real to the symbolic, as is supposed in mirror-stage development. Instead, they always exist in the symbolic, and it is only after eating the forbidden fruit that they become aware of the materiality of the Real and the lack at the heart of the symbolic. In a sense, the story of man’s fall is the story of the emergence of the Gaze insofar as the materiality of the Real and the lack of the symbolic converge precisely at the point where Adam and Eve recognize their nudity and become ashamed.

But this is a digression, so to return to Kafka and the idea of time as “serial repetition” or the “eternal repetition of the process,” Corngold points out that the novel seems situated at or near the limits of physical reality, with the space and time of the court characterized by a marginality or absurdity—“time is only serial repetition” (173). The flogging scene is the best example, combining the spatial marginality of the junk closet with the absurdity of a space where time is warped nearly to the point of cessation, as K. is distressed to discover. It is important to note that Kafka’s manipulation of time in The Trial is multifaceted: in the flogging scene(s), time appears to have stopped, but there are also examples where time is accelerated, such as the first meeting with Leni, or K.’s attempt to draft a petition at work. In other passages, time seems to skip or disappear, like a record skipping. The best example of this of course is the famous “discrepancy” of the meeting time with the Italian at the cathedral—is it at ten or eleven? The importance of the different

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8 The “limits of physical reality,” of course, must not be confused with the Lacanian Real, since such “limits” are clearly an attribute of the symbolic order—that is, the “limits of physical reality” correspond to the limits of the symbolic order.
distortions of time is the implication of time as pliable and subjective, rather than a steadfast, objective measure of “reality.”

In light of this manipulation of time, one must recall Freud’s assertion that time does not exist in dreams, despite the appearance or illusion of a narrative chronology. To be certain, time does not exist at all in the unconscious. Norman O. Brown notes of the concept of time in psychoanalysis: “It suggests that if the human mind were to break through the veil of phenomena and reach ‘noumenal’ reality, it would find no time” (94). He goes on to discuss the nature of such a “noumenal” reality, citing Aristotle: “Perfect activity [according to Aristotle] is activity without motion or change or passivity, and therefore, since time is correlative with motion, an activity not in time” (96). The court in The Trial is just such a “perfect activity” which is “not in time.” Another example of the attack on time happens only by the elegance of whimsy. The disjointed, fragmented nature of the manuscript of The Trial—reaching Brod in the state that it did—has notoriously posed problems concerning its narrative chronology, ultimately making it a text forever bound to have a chronology imposed on it, just as with the retelling of dreams.

The “eternal repetition of the process,” to return to Kafka’s aphorism about the expulsion from Eden, is also a “perfect activity” since there is essentially no motion or change, although “expulsion” is not passivity and thus still activity. What binds Kafka’s aphorism about the expulsion from Paradise with the psychoanalytic concept of time, as noted by Brown, is the radical idea of a “noumenal” reality veiled by human consciousness. In light of the idea of consciousness as a process (Proceß) of “eternal repetition” which veils “noumenal” reality, I must return for a moment to K.’s reenactment of the commission of inquiry.
As I mentioned in a previous footnote (52n4), Lanz’s knock which interrupts K.’s reenactment of the commission of inquiry relates to Lacan’s anecdote in which a knock awakens him from a nap. Lacan uses this example to differentiate between perception and consciousness: his perception of the knock results in a compensatory dream, but he only becomes conscious of the knock upon his waking. He theorizes that the unconscious mediates between perception and consciousness, and in this example, his consciousness *reconstructs itself* around the knocking, situating him again in “empirical” reality. “Upon awakening, [Lacan] reconstitutes himself—as ego—around the knocking; he reconstructs the whole representation of the world, his whole representational self, around the knocks. In other words . . . consciousness, is not a permanent feature in any sense, but something which must be *continually reconstructed*: the ego” (Fink 226, emphasis added).

Such a continual (“eternal”) reconstruction implies the existence of a “noumenal” reality, and one finds this repetitive process throughout Lacan’s theory. It relates to the thesis of his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”—namely, that the subject is determined by the insistence of the signifying chain. It also relates to his assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language. In *Book II* of his seminar, Lacan writes:

> Apropos of states of desire, what Freud puts into play is the correspondence between the object which appears and the structures already constituted in the ego. . . . To the extent that what appears to him corresponds only partially with what has already gained him satisfaction, the subject engages in a quest, and repeats his quest indefinitely until he rediscovers this object.

The object is encountered and is structured along the path of a repetition—to find the object again, to repeat the object. Except, it never is the
same object which the subject encounters. In other words, he never ceases
generating substitutive objects.

Within this theory, which seems to hold up, we find then the first hint,
at a materialist level, of the process of the function of repetition as structuring
the world of objects. (100)

This “world of objects” then consists of the Real in its entirety—in other words, “noumenal”
reality. The repetitive process of structuration is then equivalent to the symbolic order, while
the “unconscious gap,” the ineffable supplement or remainder constitutes—in conjunction
with the symbolic—the “fissureless,” “noumenal” Real in its entirety. In the Rome
Discourse, Lacan asserts that this repetitive process is equivalent to the symbolic order: “it
was certainly the Word that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is our
mental action that continues this creation by constantly renewing it. And we can only think
back to this action by allowing ourselves to be driven ever further ahead by it” (RD 60-1/271,
emphasis added).

What I am working toward with this discussion of repetitive structuration,
“noumenal” reality, the unconscious, and time as an imposed structure is this: that the court
bears an uncanny similarity to Lacan’s formulation of the unconscious. As such, it is entirely
suitable to adapt Lacan’s famous dictum to The Trial and assert that the Court is structured
like a language.

The court “insists” in its pursuit of the guilty; it is “attracted by guilt” (Trial 9, 39). It
becomes such a persistent intrusion in K.’s life to the extent that it comes to define him as
subject. Of course, the idea that the court determines K.’s status in the (symbolic) community
implies a host of Lacanian dictums: “The subject does not exist outside the signifying chain
but rather *in-sists* within it” (Homer 48), or “it is the language that speaks through us rather than the language we speak” (Homer 44). “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (STPL 32). “If the symbolic function functions, we are inside it. And I would even say—we are so far into it that we can’t get out of it” (S2 31). “[T]he repressed is always there, insisting, and demanding to be” (S2 308).

The court “in-sists” also in its *de facto* nature of continual deferral, comparable to the process of signification where the meaning of a given signifier is continually deferred to other signifiers. We see this in *The Trial* in the lawyer’s curious “speech” to K. (112-22), that monologue which is never spoken, yet conveyed nevertheless: “The gradations and ranks of the court are infinite . . . The proceedings of the courts of law are generally a mystery to the lower officials as well; therefore they can almost never follow the progress of the cases they are working on throughout their course; the case enters their field of vision, often they know not whence, and continues on, they know not where” (118). In the metonymic functioning of court officials described here, we find a system—like language—where a microscopic perspective reveals seeming chaos and happenstance, but a macroscopic perspective shows only a system which functions effectively. In this manner, the court is structured like a language.

Another example of the deferral inherent in the court’s functioning is the means by which the painter offers K. a way “out” of a conviction, namely, apparent acquittal and protraction. The painter describes apparent acquittal as a process where K.’s case files would “remain in circulation; following the law court’s normal routine they are passed on to the higher courts, come back to the lower ones, swinging back and forth with larger or smaller oscillations, longer or shorter interruptions” (158). Of course, an arrest is certain at some
point, at which time “it is again possible, just as before, to secure an apparent acquittal. . . .
the second acquittal is followed by a third arrest, the third acquittal by a fourth arrest, and so on. That’s inherent in the very concept of apparent acquittal” (159). This “normal routine [where the files] are passed on” brings to mind the passing of meaning from signifier to signifier in an endless process of definition. K.’s other option “out” of a conviction is protraction, where “the trial is constantly kept at the lowest stage. . . . The trial must be kept constantly spinning within the tight circle to which it’s artificially restricted” (160-1). Again, in protraction it is difficult not to make a comparison to the signifying chain.

The “universal system of lies”

Many critics have seen the “In the Cathedral” chapter as the crux of the novel, and with good reason. The parable of the doorkeeper is found here, a text autonomous enough for Kafka to publish it by itself as “Before the Law.” The parable is terse and straightforward enough, yet its meaning remains elusive. In the dialogue between K. and the priest, a kind of critical repetition compulsion (in the Freudian sense) emerges which attempts to deal with the narrative “trauma” of a text which resists interpretation. This particular passage concerns the reader not simply as a reader, but particularly as a reader of Kafka, since so much of his output—both the fragments and the completed works—exhibits this “narrative trauma.” As noted by Camus: “The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread.” And the fact that this rereading is of an ambivalent nature—it sole purpose is not only a pursuit of pleasure, but also a pressing need to “work through”—can be seen in the title of Corngold’s book on “The Metamorphosis,” The Commentator’s Despair. This relationship is also
expressed by the priest in the explication of the parable itself: “The text is immutable, and the opinions are often only an expression of despair over it” (220).

As K. and the priest cycle through the various interpretations, the priest concludes that to doubt the doorkeeper “is to doubt the Law itself,” and that “you don’t have to consider everything [the doorkeeper says to be] true, you just have to consider it necessary.” K. disagrees, despairing that in such an interpretation “[l]ies are made into a universal system” (223). K.’s conclusion echoes the structural linguistics upon which Lacan based his “return to Freud.” All language, as “a universal system” of communication, lacks a positive term to anchor the meaning or signification of words. Instead, meaning is derived negatively from the signifying chain—that “infinitely complicated cathedral of concepts [built] on moving foundations, or . . . on flowing water” (879), to use Nietzsche’s analogy.

It is something of a let down to discover that Kafka designates the stool which the doorkeeper gives the man from the country by using the word, Schemel, which specifies a (foot-)stool, rather than using the more general Stuhl, which carries the medical connotation of “stool.” Thus, the pun on the doorkeeper giving the man a stool is not extant in the original, but something which emerges in translation, since (to be explicit) the doorkeeper truly does give the man from the country shit—in the sense that he gives him a hard time, he gives him nothing (that could help him), and anything he does give him (in terms of advice or information) is rubbish, refuse, worthless. However, the pun that is present in the German text is less bawdy and of much more interest in trying to understand this pivotal chapter, not to mention the novel itself. The doorkeeper gives the man from the country a stool, “einen
"Schemel" (Erzählungen 145); Schemel is nearly both a homophone and a homonym of Schemen, a “phantom, shadow, delusion” (Cassell’s).9

The idea of delusion or deception is the very heart of the matter. Again, the aphorisms reveal how imposing the idea of deception was for Kafka. “Can you know anything other than deception? If ever the deception is annihilated, you must not look in that direction or you will turn into a pillar of salt” (BON Aphorism 106*, Kafka’s emphasis). So important is deception that the parable’s introduction into the narrative is entirely contingent upon the idea of deception: “‘Don’t deceive yourself,’ said the priest. ‘How am I deceiving myself?’ asked K. ‘You’re deceiving yourself about the court,’ said the priest, ‘in the introductory texts to the law it says of this deception: Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. . . . ’” (215).

And as the man from the country nears his demise, the parable reads: “Finally his eyes grow dim and he no longer knows whether it’s really getting darker around him or if his eyes are merely deceiving him” (216). Note that the final clause of that sentence—in the German: “oder ob ihn nur seine Augen täuschen” (Erzählungen 145)—emphasizes täuschen (“they deceive”) by its placement at the end of the sentence. Without question this sentence is the turning point in the parable (and arguably in the novel, as well), when the man’s hope, patience, and frustration transform into moribund despair.

Once the parable ends, any doubt at all about the fundamental role of deception in the parable, the chapter, and the novel is immediately dispatched with K.’s initial response: “‘So the doorkeeper deceived the man,’ K. said at once, strongly attracted to the story” (217). And

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9 While today Schemen typically denotes the plural form of Schema, “scheme,” the (apparently obsolete) usage cited in Cassell’s German Dictionary (1978), “phantom, shadow, delusion”—the sense which one still finds today in Schemenhaft, commonly translated as “unreal”, but in Cassell’s also “shadowy, ghostly”—is the sense relevant here. Flügel, Schmidt, and Tanger’s 1896 dictionary translates Schemen as “phantom, shadow,” and perhaps more significant to the assertion that Kafka puns on Schemel is that one still finds this translation in Heath’s dictionary, published in 1936.
despite the priest’s assertion—“I’ve told you the story word for word according to the text. It says nothing about deception.”—the entire explication passage between K. and the priest revolves around the question of who deceives whom in the parable.

Deception and lying in particular are important for Lacan as well: “That said, we, the analysts, must not overlook our basic assumption—we think there are subjects other than us, that authentically intersubjective relations exist. We would have no reason to think that if we didn’t have the testimony of the characterising feature of intersubjectivity, that is, that the subject can lie to us. That is the decisive proof” (S2 244). Not only is the lie the “decisive proof” of the existence of intersubjectivity, but it also is capable of revealing the truth: “At the level of the unconscious, the subject lies. And this lying is his way of telling the truth of the matter. The ὅρθος λόγος [right discourse] of the unconscious at this level—as Freud indicates clearly in the Entwurf in relation to hysteria—is expressed as πρῶτον ψεύδος, the first lie” (S7 73). And in thinking of the importance of the lie or deception, one must not lose sight of the fact that the entire symbolic order is based upon delusion or deception of one kind or another: recall the importance of mirror-stage delusion (misrecognition) in the development of the psyche, according to Lacan.

But it is important to understand that what makes language a “universal system of lies” is not that language does not function or that signification does not exist at all; rather, it is the completely arbitrary nature of the relationship between a signified and its signifier that undermines this stable notion of “Truth” which K. desires. The leeway caused by the arbitrariness of the signifier is exactly what the priest refers to when he says “you don’t have to consider everything true, you just have to consider it necessary.” Kafka himself felt uncertain of language, as this frequently cited passage from the diaries proves: “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. . . ‘Mutter’ is peculiarly German for the Jew . . . the word ‘Vater’ too is far from meaning the Jewish father” (24 Oct. 1911).

K. between two deaths

By this point in the novel, the trial has worn on K. to the degree that he basically becomes a semi-automaton—his actions more like primitive reactions, the gap between his perception and consciousness apparently having grown over the course of the trial. In other words, the unconscious has shifted from that which mediates between perception and consciousness to that which insulates between the two. And if one accepts the argument that the court resembles the unconscious, the assertion that the “gap” between perception and consciousness—the unconscious—has grown as the trial progressed makes perfect sense, since the presence of the court in K.’s life has grown as well.

Textual evidence does exist which would support this argument. Immediately following K.’s complaint that “lies are made into a universal system”—the text continues: “K. said that with finality, but it was not his final judgment. He was too tired to take in all of the consequences of the story; they led him into unaccustomed areas of thought, toward abstract notions more suited for discussion by the officials of the court than by him” (Trial 223). One gets a sense of K.’s automatic (re)action in the “finality” with which K. speaks, despite his not feeling any sense of finality about the subject. And K. would prefer to defer to the court the “unaccustomed areas of thought” resulting from the parable.

Condensed in the idea of the K-automaton are the notions of the primacy of the signifier over the subject and, as we see in the final chapter, K.’s assumption of the signifier,
his Atè, and by extension, K. between two deaths. I will return later to the two deaths, as the primacy of the signifier and K.’s assumption of his Atè lead to that. Lacan states that “language delivers its judgment to whoever knows how to hear it” (STPL 39). In that sense then, the novel describes the route of a letter’s arrival, the symbolic debt being paid.

In the context of censorship versus resistance, Lacan alludes to an example from Freud’s Rat Man case history. Freud says that the Rat Man’s repudiation of his wish that his father would die is comparable to a law forbidding that anyone say, “The Emperor is an ass,” under penalty of death. The prohibition disregards the context, even if the context is “If anyone says, etc., . . . then he will have me to reckon with” (SE 10 179). Therefore, Lacan writes, “[t]he subject is caught up in the necessity of having to eliminate, to extract from the discourse everything pertaining to what the law forbids . . .” (S2 129). While this specific prohibition is limited to speech, body language is “fundamentally a form of language, with the same structural features” (Evans 97, his emphasis). And what is “Law” if not a set of rules which govern action? Regardless, the point here is that K. has no knowledge of the law, of course, other than law as a “negative precept” which one may trace back to Moses, the Ten Commandments, and the idea of “the lie as the most fundamental desire” (S7 82).

Simply put: K. knows only that the law forbids—what?—he forgot. To continue along Lacan’s reasoning in the Seminar on “The Purloined Letter,” the Law does not forget him; it forgets him so little that it transforms him into the signifier already assigned him, since once the court brings a charge, it is already convinced of the defendant’s guilt. To see that K. forgets where the law remembers, one need look no further than the uncle’s apprehension that “that’s not how an innocent man acts” (92).
As K. continues through his trial, and the court divides perception and consciousness ever further, he begins not only to act guilty (unconsciously, to be sure), but he eventually succumbs to the court’s “insistence” and assumes his Atè, “guilty,” which he has tried to avoid since the arrest.

What one finds in K.’s assumption of the signifier, the signifier “guilty” which already defines his existence in the symbolic order, is the “choice” of “the father and worse.” K.’s assuming the signifier, and thus submitting to the Name of the Father and the symbolic, assures K. will be punished, and with unrelenting severity, if the flogging of the guards for their infractions is any indication. Yet, should he refuse the signifier, he will face punishment in the form of banishment from the symbolic community, that is: death in the symbolic. Either way, in his attempt to elude the signifier—which is to say the signifier proper to him—the signifier has been displaced, prolonged, “in sufferance.” And we know that “if it be in sufferance, they shall endure the pain.”

The fact that K. has attempted to escape the signifier bestowed upon him by the symbolic clearly has had no actual effect on his position in the symbolic order: he has been guilty since the arrest, as everyone points out to him throughout the novel. So truly, his death in the symbolic occurs not when the henchmen come in the final chapter, but instead it comes much earlier. Brod’s interpretation of The Trial in his biography of Kafka is appropriate in this context:

The two black mysterious bailiffs only carry out a sentence that has already been carried out. As they lead K. away, they form together with him “one unit, such as almost only lifeless matter can form.” He is dead already: that is to say, dead to real life. That is the real reason why the ghostly appearance for
Fräulein Bürstner has such a paralyzing effect on him. He wants to see her, not because he promises himself any help from doing so, but “in order not to forget the warning she holds for him.” K. had not married, remained a bachelor, had allowed himself to be terrified by the reality of life, had not defended himself against it—that is his secret guilt, which had already, before his condemnation, shut him out from the circle of life. K. died of weakness in living, is already dead from the beginning of the book—from the moment of the arrest, which Kafka must have written in a kind of trance. (Brod 179)

If one reads *The Trial* in this way, where K.’s death in the symbolic actually precedes the narrative text altogether, then the entire novel becomes the story of K. between two deaths, a “lament” which surpasses Antigone’s lament in length, scope, and range of emotion. In a reading such as this, the entire novel—in all its fragmentation, bizarreness, fright, and uncanniness—serves as an example of the Kafkaesque residing in the void between the two deaths.

Again, this void space between the two deaths is one capable of “sublime beauty” and “terrifying monsters.” Of the beauty of the novel, Benjamin notes: “From *The Trial* it may seem that these proceedings usually are hopeless for those accused—hopeless even when they have hopes of being acquitted. It may be this hopelessness that brings out the beauty in them” (Benjamin 116). This is certainly the case in the final chapter, where K. seems to lose all hope of redemption. In that same passage, Benjamin cites one of Brod’s anecdotes about Kafka, where Kafka concludes a conversation about God by asserting that there is “plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (Brod, qtd. in Benjamin 116).
As noted earlier, the point at which K. loses all hope (or discards it) is when the Fräulein Bürstner figure appears. It is almost as if K. realizes the hope he had previously held on to in his final attempt to resist the guards was this “infinite amount of hope” which was not meant for him. After this, we see a side of K. previously absent in the novel; he seems remorseful, resigned, and broken:

I’ve always wanted to seize the world with twenty hands, and what’s more with a motive that was hardly laudable. That was wrong; do I want to show now that even a yearlong trial could teach me nothing? Do I want to leave the parting impression that I’m slow-witted? Shall they say of me that at the beginning of my trial I wanted to end it, and now, at its end, I want to begin it again? I don’t want them to say that. I’m grateful they’ve sent these half-mute, insensitive men to accompany me on this journey, and that it’s been left to me to say myself what needs to be said. (228)

This oscillation in K.’s demeanor makes his death that much more tragic. There is a profoundly alarming stoicism in K.’s resignation, in his assumption of his Atè: “There would be nothing heroic in resistance, in making trouble for these men, in trying to enjoy a final vestige of life by fighting back” (227). What is perhaps most alarming is the manifestation of the death instinct, in which K. cannot even try to “enjoy a final vestige of life,” since that certainly seems to belong to the realm of the pleasure principle and Eros in general.

But despite this submission to the death instinct, the tragedy is in the final oscillation in K.’s ambivalent demise. In a scene which is unquestionably an allusion to the parable of the doorkeeper, as K. nears his end, he sees a light come on in a building adjacent to the quarry, just as the man from the country sees a radiance emerge from the law. Then “a
human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and height, leaned far out abruptly, and stretched both arms out even further.” Then the monopolized narration describes a flurry of questions that flow as if from panic: “Who was it? A friend? A good person? Someone who cared? Some who wanted to help? Was it just one person? Was it everyone? Was there still help? Were there objections that had been forgotten? Of course there were.”

Then comes one of the most curious sentences in the entire novel: “Logic is no doubt unshakeable, but it can’t withstand a person who wants to live.” How are we to interpret this sentence? Logic is the foundation of Law insofar as proof of guilt or innocence must be arrived at through the use of logic; moreover, logic is the foundation of Law in that it is a fundamental component of the symbolic order. But the centrality of logic in the law does not get us closer to understanding this sentence. Is it in reference to the objections which “of course” had been forgotten? Does it imply K.’s wish to die, since “it can’t withstand a person who wants to live”? This seems at odds with this final oscillation in which K. appears to want to live, which can be deduced not only from the string of questions which perhaps come from K. and not only the narrator, but also in K.’s final gesture, mirroring the figure in the window: “He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers” (231).
Conclusion: “Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?”

Ironically, an ambiguous sense of transcendence permeates the conclusions of so many of Kafka’s stories, particularly in *The Trial* and “The Judgment”, and in a sense, Kafka’s life itself. Perhaps even more ironic is that this transcendence brings us back to Oedipus. However, this is not Oedipus in any Freudian sense of infantile incestuous desires or anxiety of castration at the hands of the father; rather, this is the Oedipus frequently cited by Lacan, Oedipus as he appears near his end in *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Upon hearing that Thebes wants him to return in order to grant the city favor, Oedipus disdains: “Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?” (393). The meaning of this line, Lacan states, is that “Oedipus has completely passed over into his destiny” (S2 230). By sitting at Colonus, he has fulfilled “the prophecy [parole] down to the last detail,” that parole which has determined the entire course of his life before he was even born. For Lacan the theme of this “essential drama of destiny” is found in the words of the chorus, which echo the death drive: “Say what you will, the greatest boon is not to be; / But, life begun, soonest to end is best” (1225-6).

The ambiguity of Kafkan transcendence is that it is predicated first on realizing the depths of despair, and then once this happens, it seems, death is almost immediate—“soonest to end is best.” This is not only the case with Georg and K., but also with some of Kafka’s other renowned characters, like Gregor Samsa, the Captain in “The Penal Colony,” and the hunger artist, to name a few. Yet with each of these figures, the exact nature of his

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1 Lacan uses this translation, the same as the 1947 Watling translation of *Oedipus at Colonus*. The 1912 Storr translation, which I have otherwise used, especially for *Antigone*, reads: “So, when I cease to be, my worth begins.” However, in the Greek the line ends with ἄνθρωπος or “man” (*Classic Greek Dict.*), thus my preference for the Watling translation here.
“transcendence” is no doubt open to much debate and various interpretations. To return to the example of Oedipus, his statement—“Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?”—represents the moment of his “transcendence,” but given his history and the way his life will end, one almost has to qualify any such assertion by saying: *this is the moment of his transcendence*—if you can call that transcendence.

John McGowan notes of the idea of Kafka and transcendence:

> For the transcendent artist, the word is the only means by which he can know and make known the fact of his transcendence, yet the use of words precipitates his fall back to the ordinary realm of men. (For this reason, Kafka calls writing “not death, but the eternal torments of dying” since it involves a movement out of this life, but one that is never fully realized.) (McGowan 6)

Condensed in this argument are precisely the ideas this study has focused on: language, repetition, and death. The interaction of the three in Kafka’s world cannot be underestimated. Ernst Pawel writes of Kafka’s relationship with language that, for him, “The irresistible compulsion to write seemed to him part of a dark, utterly personal fate, and there is no doubt that much of the time he felt more driven than chosen” (97).

Kafka assumed his *Atè*—his “fate as suffering,” that “dark, utterly personal fate”—which one finds succinctly stated in the draft of a letter to Felice’s father: “I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else” (21 Aug. 1913). Such sentiments about writing are found throughout the diaries. But as with Georg Bendemann, Josef K., and Oedipus before them, Kafka’s assumption of his *Atè* would come at the expense of his life. He is “made man in the hour when he ceases to be” in the sense that he would never fully realize the height to which his *Atè* would raise him, would never realize his own literary
renown. Kafka’s transcendence—if you can call it that—would come in the moments when he could take pride in his work, sporadic as they may have been. Perhaps this sort of ambiguous transcendence may be understood through another lens, for which I will turn to Žižek: “What we call creation is a kind of a cosmic imbalance, cosmic catastrophe . . . things exist by mistake. And I’m even ready to go to the end and to claim that the only way to counteract this is to assume the mistake and go to the end. And we have a name for this: it's called love” (Žižek!, emphasis added). This idea of assuming “the mistake” and following it to its conclusion is precisely the situation in which Kafka’s characters find themselves. Georg assumes his mistake, and his act may be called an act of love insofar as it is submission to the desire of the Other, his father. K.’s resignation at the end of The Trial is also in some sense his giving way as to the desire of the Other, since it is not for his sake that he forsakes resistance but for the Fräulein Bürstner figure. And finally, Kafka’s commitment to literature and his own writing may be called “love” in this sense, with all the strife that entails.

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2 This is taken very much out of context, though taking things out of context is essentially what Žižek is getting at here as he goes on to talk about love and the violence of love as a selective act: “Love for me is an extremely violent act. Love is not I love you all. Love means I pick out something, and again it’s this structure of imbalance, even if this something is just a small detail—a fragile individual person” (Žižek!).
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