

Please use the other door: Opening Kafka's *The Trial*
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I see the poem or the novel ending with an open door.

–Michael Ondaatje

[K.] went through the next room into the one beyond, the door of which was already wide open.

–Franz Kafka

Prologue

When is a door not a door?
When it is a jar [ajar]. [*da-dum tsh!*]

I love this joke because it hinges on a simple double *entendre*. Maintaining this double vision is precisely how to get the most out of Kafka's works. He is always working with the ambiguities of language, and readers need to keep their wits/*Witz* about them to see what else is going on.ⁱ Popular stereotypes of Kafka's works paint them as ominous and gloomy, but the author could in fact barely keep himself together when reading aloud to his friends, collapsing into guffaws at his own jokes.ⁱⁱ

This joke has further significance for my own reading of *The Trial* (1925 [1914-1915]), which also pivots on doors. If I were to rewrite this one-liner to reflect the pith of the novel, it would go something like this:

When is a door *adore*?
When it is fully open.

This version isn't nearly as funny as the original, but it characterizes my interpretation of Kafka's *The Trial*. Criticism has focused intensely on the parable near the end of the novel about the man who waits in front of the open door until his dying day and never gains access.ⁱⁱⁱ In this

paper, however, I argue that the real tragedy is that there is in fact nothing preventing the man from entering through the door except himself. He withers away in front of the closed door without realizing that *he is the door*. It is not the door that he needs to open but rather himself. Like K., this man feels he is a victim of the law, when he is ultimately a victim of his own blindness. In this way, we could rewrite the joke one more time:

When is a door *d'or* (made of gold)?
When there is no *dehors* (outside).

With the homonym door/*dehors*, I am making a play-on-words with Jacques Derrida's dictum, "il n'y pas de hors-texte" ("there is nothing outside the text" / "there is no outside to the text"), where text cannot be separated from context, where there is no experience outside of language or another medium, and where reality is filtered through the lens of supplementarity and simultaneity (*Of Grammatology*, 158). This may be a useful model for *The Trial*, but more to the point I want to propose is that there is *nothing outside the door, that there is no outside to the door* in the doorkeeper parable. Even though I have already said that the man does not need to wait for the door to open because *he is the door*, I would also maintain that the *novel is a door*, one that begs to be opened, not so that we can find answers to the questions of the universe, but rather as a means to discover what is inside ourselves.^{iv} If the nameless protagonist in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* enters a wall some half a century after *The Trial* was written, Kafka invites his readers to stop banging their heads against a wall and open the @#\$% door.^v

In order to illustrate the ways in which doors are opened, closed and then opened again in *The Trial*, I begin by demonstrating that Kafka's protagonist Joseph K. emerges not merely as the accused and the defendant in his trial but also as the persecuted. I show how the first few lines grammatically frame K. as helpless, and how an imagined game of mistaken identities links him to the Habsburg Empire's King and Kaiser, a doubled monarch who was at the time when Kafka was composing *The Trial* both powerful and extremely weak. I then investigate photography, painting and writing, and show that the conundrum of representation functions like a hall of mirrors for K.'s already confused identity as perpetrator and victim. I then turn to spaces and places, showing that doors and windows are not the exits one can trust, and that Kafka's choices of syntax and vocabulary mime the claustrophobic narrative landscapes. Finally, I argue that K. is his own doorkeeper, that he indeed bars himself from the law, and that Kafka's *The Trial* can be read as a subtle but sustained critique of victim identities. I also conclude that while K.'s death results as a consequence of his failure to enter the open door, it is simultaneously a moment of self-discovery and a realization that death itself is a door.

Mistaken identities: a culprit or a king?

The novel's first sentence already hints at the ambiguous nature of Joseph K.'s role:

Jemand mußte Joseph K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet

(Kafka 7). (Someone must have slandered Josef K., for—without having committed any wrongdoing—he was arrested one morning.)^{vi}

The novel's first word—someone—is an indeterminate shifter, a suspicious culprit who is presumed to have tipped off the authorities with certain insinuating accusations. We are invited to see this nameless good-for-nothing as the wrongdoer rather than K. The imbedded clause further establishes K.'s innocence, albeit using a negative construction—"ohne daß" ("without having")—denying his participation in any untoward activities; "etwas Böses" ("a wrongdoing" / "an evil act") is an ambiguous category that can range anywhere from a child's naughtiness to evil incarnate.^{vii} We learn that the result of his having been maligned is that K. has been arrested; the use of the passive voice here further confirms K.'s status as victim by placing him grammatically in the role of submissive recipient of an action performed by an unnamed agent.

Stanley Corngold makes a great deal out of Kafka's decision to cross out the word "gefangen" ("caught" or "held") and replace it with "verhaftet" ("arrested") in the first manuscript.^{viii} He maintains that the change from ordinary language to legal parlance signals a major shift in the novel's design (44). While Corngold focuses on the problem of guilt—existential, legal, and authorial—I see Kafka's word choice cementing his character as a victim, not only of some arbitrary misunderstanding but of a larger injustice at the hands of the state. If K. had been detained by ordinary thugs, then it would be possible to contact the police and have the whole thing sorted out, but because he is under arrest, he has no recourse other than to negotiate with his captors.

Again I follow Corngold in reading *The Trial* as a comment on the very conditions of possibility of writing, where writing constitutes a blissful ecstasy that can "justify a ruined life" and which, when "less than wholehearted," is "a great shame" that will justify K.'s murder and outlive both author and character (xiii, 65-66). I have already proposed that, on first reading, the novel frames K. as a victim but that he is blind to the doors that await him, but I will go further and say that it does this partly by way of its self-referential mode. The laws of the land and the laws of literature are both written with a *pen* in mind, whether writing utensil or fenced enclosure. Whatever else it might be, for Kafka the law is writing itself, the nameless master who can never be pleased. The reason Joseph K.'s crime is never revealed to him is because it cannot be written. It is precisely the conundrum of writing as imperative and writing as impossibility that *pens* Kafka's K. as both perpetrator and victim.

K.'s status as victim is established in the novel's first sentence and confirmed again and again on the pages that follow. He is awakened from his sleep by the commotion and his powers of observation are limited by his low horizontal position on the bed: "[K.] sah von seinem Kopfkissen aus" ("[K.] looked up from his pillow") (Kafka 7). His helplessness is compounded by his inability to establish the identity of his captors or himself. The strange man in his room ignores his repeated requests to introduce himself, and K. only learns of his name when he is referred to in the third person as "Franz," or "Franz Benannten" ("Franz," or, "the

one called Franz”) (8) in K.’s inner voice.^{ix} K.’s first attempt to exonerate himself also revolves around the question of identity—his own. He rummages around in his drawers in search of his official papers (“Legitimationspapiere”) (11) and in a pathetic gesture wants at first to use his bicycle license but then locates his birth certificate. Showing his ID does nothing to clear up the misunderstanding, since the officer explains that he and his colleagues are but lowly employees who have no knowledge of such things. Further questions of identity arise when Franz encounters a young man blocking the doorway upon arriving back home after work. After inquiring about the man’s identity, K. is told that he is the landlord’s son, but this seems only to add to the puzzle.

By this point, the reader too has become curious about the game of names and identities. We have a protagonist, whose last name bears the same initial as that of the book’s author—K. But then the strange officer’s first name is uncannily identical to that of the author’s first name—Franz. Taken together, the names of captor and captive make Franz K. If we are not already suspicious about the onomastics here, we can add K.’s first name—Joseph—into the mix. The Joseph of the Hebrew Bible was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and so suffers seemingly undeserved hardship as does Joseph K., but that’s where the similarities end, since Kafka’s K. does not become a powerful man with a many-coloured coat. However, if we add together the first names of the author and his protagonist, *Franz K.* and *Joseph K.*, we have *Franz Joseph*, a more compelling extratextual reference. Emperor Franz Joseph II was the longest reigning Habsburg Monarch, who, at the time when Kafka first began writing *The Trial*, had just declared war on Serbia, thereby launching the domino effect that would become World War I. To further cement this interpretation, we can take the initials of Franz and Joseph’s family names and get K.[afka] and K., the abbreviation for the unusual dual monarchy of Austro-Hungary: “*Königliche und Kaiserliche Donaumonarchie*” or “*K. und K. Monarchie*” (“K. and K. Monarchy”) as it is better known.

Franz K[akfa] + Joseph K.
= [Kaiser] **Franz Joseph**
= **K. u. K.** [Monarchie]

Although readers even vaguely familiar with Kafka’s works know how important onomastic codifications are to him, I do not wish to imply that this exact configuration was intentional on his part. Rather, I’ll merely assert that it is a useful allegory for the power struggle we witness in the opening chapter of *The Trial*.

Kafka lived not in the centre of the Empire, but rather at its margins—a Jew in Czech-speaking Prague, where the nationalist agenda had given rise to significant anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, he spoke the language of the Kaiser, had been educated at a prestigious *Gymnasium* and graduated with a doctorate in Law. Furthermore, given his family’s secure position in the merchant class, he was squarely situated in the bourgeoisie and could hardly claim economic oppression. Still, as an employee of the *Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt des Königreich Böhmen* (Worker’s Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia), he can be said to have done the Kaiser’s bidding, developing complex legal cases on behalf of the

Institute. More to the point, Kafka *felt* burdened by his employment and considered himself a failure in his father's eyes. It is this very struggle of oppressor/oppressed, perpetrator/victim that we see presented as an absurd theatre in the first pages of *The Trial*. Like the battle between Franz and Joseph in the first chapter of the novel, the Kaiser Franz Joseph was in a precarious position, the most powerful monarch in Europe on paper, and yet the head of an empire racing at high speed—especially after its declaration of war—toward its doom.^x

Photographic reproducibility: Coping with copies

The question of identity also asserts itself through symbolic and narrative means, for example with the marked presence of photographs in the first chapter. K. notices the pictures in Frau Grubach's parlour as he is trying to edge his way out of his own cramped quarters, hoping vainly that there might be "ein wenig mehr Raum als sonst" ("a little more room than usual") in this trinket-laden room (Kafka 8). But the word photograph appears another ten times in this first chapter, all relating to Fräulein Bürstner's room, where K. had glimpsed three young men peering with interest at the framed images. The Fräulein is incensed when she finds out her photographs have been handled (31), and K. promises to have the bank employee in question fired.

We never learn why these photographs are such magnets for the investigators, but I suggest that we hear about them because they point to the means of representation. Photographs reproduce an identical likeness of a person or object. As Walter Benjamin has theorized, they simultaneously point to the original and deny originality in their reproducibility.^{xi} For our purposes, however, the photographs in Fräulein Bürstner's room remind us of the shortcomings of writing as a means to fully saturate any given reality. This is made explicit by the fact that during the course of their conversation about photographs, K. is at pains to explain to his fellow lodger the exact location of the three men looking at the photographs, insisting on rearranging the furniture in her room to simulate the spatial configuration. Neither K.'s reconstruction of the scene nor Kafka's words can even approximate the events, however. Furthermore, the Fräulein fails to grasp the urgency with which K. seeks to reproduce the morning's goings-on.

K.'s efforts to prove his identity—including the absurd idea of using his bicycle license—are not different from his attempt to accurately mime the events of the morning to Fräulein Bürstner. The photographs hint at a complete reproducibility, the kind that supercedes Kafka's—and every writer's—representational talents. The impossibility of producing an identical relationship—including the sameness of the initials of K. with Kafka and F.B. with Fräulein Bürstner and Kafka's then fiancée Felice Bauer, identical and yet not—is perceived as a punishment by both K. and his author.

Reproducibility and identity are again thematized in the exchange between K. and Titorelli. K. learns of the court painter from a client at the bank and immediately seeks him out in an effort to gain more knowledge about his case. He hands Titorelli a letter of introduction and expects to have the painter illuminate the situation, but instead the painter asks whether K. would like to purchase a painting or commission a portrait. K. questions the validity of the

letter—“Was stand denn eigentlich in dem Brief?” (“What was in the letter after all?”) (Kafka 151)— a hint that the written word always says more than we think or than was intended. This exchange leads to a discussion about a portrait of a judge that Titorelli is currently painting. K. recognizes the similarity between this painting and the one he had seen on his lawyer’s wall; they appear to be the same except that this one is done with pastels instead of oil paint. K. asks about an additional figure in the middle of the painting, whereupon Titorelli admits that it still needs work and begins touching it up, “ohne sie aber dadurch für K. *deutlicher* zu machen” (“without thereby *clarifying* it at all for K.”), another hint at the question of systemic unrepresentability (152, my emphasis). Finally, Titorelli reveals that it is the figure of Justice and the Goddess of Victory all in one, and when K. expresses doubts about this combination, the painter patiently explains that if Justice does not remain still, the scales will waver and prohibit a “gerechtes Urteil” (“just verdict”) (152). K. notes that the play of shadows encircling the Goddess’s head causes her to stand out in a radiant light, giving her the appearance of the Goddess of the Hunt, an ominous sign for K.’s case. K. remarks upon the accuracy of the painting, but Titorelli assures him that the whole thing is an invention, that he merely paints what the judges want and always gives them more status than they actually have. At this point, K. notices that he has become entranced by the painting and rebukes himself for having stayed so long.

But the visit does not end here. Titorelli goes into a long and not very encouraging diatribe about the types of acquittal available to defendants, after which K. is about to expire from the stifling heat and poor air in the attic. Yet just as he is about to leave, Titorelli again asks him if he wants to buy a painting and offers him a highland landscape, which K. purchases. As soon as he agrees to take this one, Titorelli offers him “ein Gegenstück” (“a contrasting piece”)—which, however, turns out to be identical (Kafka 169). If that were not enough, K. is coerced into buying a third painting described by the painter as similar, but which is also identical to the other two. By now gasping for air, K. steps over the bed and bursts out into the hall.

The encounter with Titorelli thematizes the question of representation and identity. In this pivotal chapter, it is no longer K. who is uncertain of his identity; the focus is rather on identical reproducibility. Unlike photographs, paintings are not meant to be perfect renderings, and yet Titorelli’s canvases are made up of portraits and landscapes, each with multiple identical copies. This representational accuracy lends a certain sense of authority to the paintings as being *true* to their subjects. And yet we learn that the paintings are indeed not true representations at all, but rather tell lies. They lie about the judges’ status, knowledge that now undermines not merely the authenticity and authority of the painting but also that of the judges and the justice they stand for. Representation is further questioned when the landscape paintings K. agrees to purchase are presented as unique renderings by the painter and yet appear identical in K.’s eyes.

If images cannot be trusted, writing provides no further certainty. At the outset of the chapter, K. contemplates providing the court with a written defense and convinces himself of the advantages of a written statement. But writing has already been undermined by K.’s lawyer, who declares that evidence and observation is much more important than written documents.

Moreover, the deputy director of the bank ignores the written documents presented by K. when he takes over the manufacturer's case, saying that he already knows everything about it. More serious yet, Titorelli admits that he has never seen the law written down, but that he nonetheless knows what it says.^{xii}

In short, it is difficult to know which—if any—medium might offer a true representation—not paintings and not writing either. In fact, it is difficult to know how one might find any truth in this world. When K. meets Titorelli, he wants to learn the truth about his case, but gets sidetracked by the discussion about paintings. He blames the painter for this diversion, but then Titorelli turns the tables and accuses him: “‘Nur immer gleich mit der *Wahrheit* heraus,’ sagte er, ‘Sie wollen etwas über das Gericht erfahren, wie es ja auch in Ihrem Empfehlungsschreiben steht, und haben zunächst über meine Bilder gesprochen, um mich zu gewinnen’” (“‘Spit out the *truth*,’ he said, ‘You want to know something about the court, as it states in your letter of introduction, and you spoke about my paintings to win me over’”) (Kafka 153, my emphasis).

K. thinks he has come to discover the truth about his trial, but in his encounter with Titorelli, truth is more a question of representation, and when it comes to paintings or writing, it is next to impossible to assess what is a true rendition. Earlier in the chapter, when K. is learning about the workings of the court, his lawyer tells him of a story, which seems truthful, “[eine] Geschichte, die sehr *den Anschein der Wahrheit* hat” (“a story, that really has *the semblance of truth*”) (Kafka 125, my emphasis). Truth is approximate, however, and there seem to be endless variations on truth, but the reader begins to suspect that truth is a secret and that everything else is rumour.^{xiii} Still, Titorelli warns K. not to dismiss legends, telling him they contain “eine gewisse *Wahrheit*” (“a sort of truth”) (160) and that in any case they are beautiful, thus securing the link between the truth of stories and the aesthetic value of images.

Truth was something that fascinated and obsessed Kafka. He wanted desperately to write “dans le vrai” (“inside the truth” or “within the truth”), a phrase he borrowed from Flaubert and used to characterize a life that evaded him (Sokel 35). Ritchie Robertson reads the phrase, taken from a letter written to George Sand in 1868, as a perfect translation of Kafka's ambivalence—both menacing and wonderful—of a life devoted to literature (21). Whatever else it might be, writing is an attempt to truly live in the realm of truth. But before we further pursue this question of Kafka's truth and how it is produced, I'll return for a moment to K.'s victim status.

Exit opportunities: defending windows and denying doors

There is no doubt that K.'s failure to assert his identity and the failure of any medium of communication—whether photography, painting or writing—to accurately depict the world construct the protagonist and his narrator as victims. But the world itself, in particular K.'s physical environment, surely confirms his status as victim under the law and as victim of the law. He is ostensibly arrested (“verhaftet”) because of his infraction of the law, yet even if Kafka did change his mind about his choice of words, there is no doubt that K. was also confined (“gefangen”). This is established from the outset by the description of his exceedingly

claustrophobic surroundings. K. is at first confined to his bed upon awakening to strangers in his midst, but even when he does get up, the four walls of his room seem to squeeze the life juice from him. He edges beyond this boundary into the neighbouring room, and at last learns that he is free to go to his workplace at the bank, a building characterized by its impenetrable vault. Having been granted this freedom of movement, we are all the more painfully aware of the enclosed inner spaces, with few exit opportunities.

The narrative maze of windows, doors, walls, hallways, staircases and rooms begins on the first page of the novel. While K. is still lying in bed, trying to work out what is going on, the stranger in his room opens the door and speaks to someone on the other side of the door without revealing who it is. K. then notices the sound of laughter coming from the other side of the door, presumably because he has deigned to ask for his breakfast. We note that the door was opened but not open wide enough for K. to see. Shortly thereafter, the security guard opens the door again—“öffnete nun *freiwillig* die Tür” (“opened the door of his own *free will*”)—and K. moves slowly through the doorway, where he hopes to find “ein wenig mehr Raum als sonst” (“a little more room than usual”) in his landlady’s sitting room stuffed with furniture and knickknacks, only to be told he ought to have stayed in his room (Kafka 8, my emphasis). At this point, K. looks over and sees his guard standing in the doorway.

In the meantime, we note the presence of a man in Frau Grubach’s room, sitting at an open window reading a book. Doors and windows often figure as portals of knowledge and communication, but despite the constant reference to their status as “open,” they seem to merely exacerbate the sensation of confinement and ignorance. K. receives the first important piece of information when the man in the window tosses the book onto the table and declares: “Sie dürfen nicht weggehen, Sie sind ja verhaftet” (“You can’t leave, you have been arrested”), to which K. retorts, “Es sieht so aus” (“So it would seem”) (Kafka 8). His biting sarcasm is met with icy silence and a refusal to divulge anything further.

If *The Trial* were performed as a play, one could imagine the scene as a slapstick comedy of flinging open and slamming doors. In the first chapter alone, the word door (“Tür”) appears thirty-six times, window (“Fenster”) eighteen times and room (“Zimmer”) an astonishing sixty-three times. The metaphors of confinement are quantifiable. At the very end of this chapter, K.’s and Fräulein Bürstner discuss the events of the morning and K. offers to claim that he had attacked her. But she will hear nothing of it, saying she can manage herself. He apologizes and wonders if she is mad at him (“böse”), to which she responds: “Nein, nein, ich bin niemals und niemandem böse” (“No, no, I’m never mad at anyone”) (Kafka 35), at which point, K. makes his move:

Er faßte wieder nach ihrem Handgelenk, sie duldeten es jetzt und führte ihn so zur *Tür*. Er war fest entschlossen, wegzugehen. Aber vor der *Tür*, als hätte er nicht erwartet, hier eine *Tür* zu finden, stockte er, diesen Augenblick benützte Fräulein Bürstner, sich loszumachen, die *Tür* zu öffnen, ins Vorzimmer zu schlüpfen und von dort aus K. leise zu sagen: »Nun kommen Sie doch, bitte. Sehen Sie« - sie zeigte auf die *Tür* des Hauptmanns, unter der ein

Lichtschein hervorkam - »er hat angezündet und unterhält sich über uns.« »Ich komme schon«, sagte K., lief vor, faßte sie, küßte sie auf den Mund und dann über das ganze Gesicht, wie ein durstiges Tier mit der Zunge über das endlich gefundene Quellwasser hinjagt. Schließlich küßte er sie auf den Hals, wo die Gurgel ist, und dort ließ er die Lippen lange liegen. Ein Geräusch aus dem Zimmer des Hauptmanns ließ ihn aufschauen. »Jetzt werde ich gehen«, sagte er (Kafka 35, my emphasis).

(He grabbed her again by the wrist, which she now allowed, and he lead her to the *door*. He had made up his mind to leave, but once in front of the *door*, as though he hadn't expected to find a *door*, he stopped, and Fräulein Bürstner took this opportunity to break lose, opening the *door* and slipping out into the entrance hall, where she whispered to K., "Now, look here, please. Don't you see" – she pointed to the Hauptmann's *door*, behind which a light was shining – "he turned his light on and he's talking about us." "Okay, I'm coming," said K., moving in, grabbing hold of her, kissing her on the mouth and then on her whole face like a thirsty animal with its tongue lapping wildly when it had at last found water. Finally, he kissed her on her neck and her throat, where his lips stayed for a long time. A noise from the Hauptmann's room made him look up. "I'll go now," he said.)

In this passage, we note the repetition of the key word – "böse" ("evil," "mad," or "angry") – which here implies a minor disagreement but which has resonances of the existential "evil" connoted in the first sentence of the novel. When Fräulein Bürstner leads K. to the door, he seems to be surprised to encounter a door, and pauses. It is again the young woman who opens the door, moves into the next room and shows K. the Hauptmann's door. There is no doubt that the threshold imagery here has sexual implications. But I would like to highlight that K. is led to a door, that he is shocked to see a door, that a woman must lead him through this door, and that she points to yet another door. In short, doors play a vital role in the evolution of the plot and the development of his character. If we combine the door metaphor and the sexual imagery, then the word "böse" invoked at the start of the passage can now be linked to a more primary form of knowledge and truth, and to a biblical sense of original sin.^{xiv}

Doors appear prominently throughout the novel, and the Titorelli scene becomes so claustrophobic that the reader can almost taste the stale air and sense K.'s light-headed nausea. When K. asks the painter whether he might open a window, he is told that they are permanently shut: "Das Gefühl, hier von der Luft vollständig abgesperrt zu sein, verursachte ihm Schwindel" ("The feeling of being utterly unable to get air, made him dizzy") (Kafka 161). K. manages to squeak out that such a situation is uncomfortable and unhealthy, to which Titorelli quips:

„O nein,“ sagte der Maler *zur Verteidigung seines Fensters*, „dadurch, daß es nicht aufgemacht werden kann, wird, obwohl es nur eine einfache Scheibe ist, die Wärme hier besser festgehalten als durch ein Doppelfenster. Will ich aber lüften, was nicht sehr notwendig ist, da durch die Balkenritzen überall Luft eindringt, *kann ich eine meiner Türen oder sogar beide öffnen.*“ (161-162, my emphasis)

(“Oh, no,” said the painter *in defense of his window*, “since it cannot be opened the room retains the heat better than if it were a double-glazed window, even though it’s only a single pane. If I want to air the place, which is not really necessary since so much air leaks in through the wooden slats, *I can open one of my doors, or even both.*”)

When Titorelli *defends* his window, we can see the narrator laughing at poor K., who searches in vein for a proper defense lawyer. And while the window remains closed, Titorelli can open one or even both of his doors with ease. Further underscoring K.’s own ineffectiveness with doors, the painter adds, “Man kann hier alle Türen mit der geringsten Anstrengung aus den Angeln brechen” (“You can remove all the doors from their hinges here with only the slightest effort”) (Kafka 162). Titorelli’s nonchalance regarding the opening or total removal of doors merely exacerbates K.’s frustration at finding himself repeatedly in front of enclosures which he cannot open, be it because he has been denied access, because they do not open, or because he simply lacks the will to open them.^{xv}

Dried-up syntax and parched vocabulary

Kafka’s stylistic choices underscore the narrative landscape of physical enclosures. Much has been made of Kafka’s prose style, in particular his narrow focus on the sentence as the “dominant unit of narration” and his peculiar syntactical choices (Gölz 35). Joyce Crick, one of Kafka’s translators, comments on his extraordinarily complicated syntax, “proliferating with qualificatory sub-clauses, themselves impeded by dense clusters of adverbs” (xxxv). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are not so reserved in their description of Kafka’s prose: “He will turn syntax into a cry that will embrace the rigid syntax of this dried-up German....To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry” (26). I would qualify Deleuze and Guattari’s assessment by saying that it is not so much Kafka’s syntax that is dried up, but rather his vocabulary that is parched, an opinion shared by Crick: “Where Kafka’s syntax is elaborate and dense, his vocabulary is as restricted as the world his figures inhabit” (xxxvi). Kafka uses a shallow inventory of words and repeats them over and over again.^{xvi} If we have a sense of labyrinthine circularity in the spaces of the novel, the language is equally windowless, like an inwardly spiraling vortex.

These narrative vortices might be said to contribute to the hypnotic effect in Kafka’s writing. There has been a lot of interest in hypnotic writing, most of it in the area of marketing

communication, promising to increase sales through persuasive rhetoric. Joe Vitale describes hypnosis as anything that holds a person's attention (xvii), and hypnotic writing as communication that is irresistible, seductive, even mesmerizing, that peaks a reader's curiosity and speaks directly to them (3-5). He promotes a conversational style using personal anecdotes, examples and questions, but the key to hypnotic writing is that it must convey a wonderful vision for a better world, in which one can easily picture oneself. Not all of this applies to Kafka, of course, but there are aspects where Vitale's hypnotic method and Kafka's style coalesce, most notably with respect to repetition: "Repetition is hypnotic. It's what good hypnotists use to install their suggestions in your mind" (83). Vitale is by no means a literary critic, but he is on to something. I would say that it is a combination of Kafka's perplexing syntax and his repetition of key words and phrases that induces an infuriatingly hypnotic effect. Because we have such a hard time keeping up with the swirl of syntax, Kafka's prose can at times seem dizzying. A third hypnotic technique is theme and variation. Often, certain key words will arise frequently and then be interspersed by another key word, which will then develop into the dominant theme, only to be superseded by yet another motif. We might liken this effect to the development of theme and variation in musical melodies. All of this, I would like to suggest, makes for hypnotic writing, placing the reader in a similarly "victimized state" to that of K.

If Kafka's prose is characterized by hypnotic repetition, it is certainly not dull. On the contrary, we are drawn to his prose precisely because of its liveliness (*Lebhaftigkeit*). Lowell Edmunds' analysis of the letters and diary entries reveals that the defining feature of Kafka's minor literature—contrary to the description of Deleuze and Guattari above—is indeed liveliness, a quality that Kafka first identifies in Goethe's prose (363) and in the work of the influential Viennese cultural critic, Karl Kraus (365).^{xvii} Liveliness refers to the interaction of objects, events, and persons, "with all their relationships intact," which allows us to "see them clearly and depict them vividly (*lebhaft*)" (Kafka, qtd. in Edmunds 366). In conclusion, the hypnotic effect of Kafka's language is not the result of dull repetition or ordinary words, but is rather the result of lively relations that arise in Kafka's prose through theme and variation.



Still shot from Claire Parker and Alexandre Alexeieff's pinscreen scenes which serve as a prelude to Orson Welles' *The Trial* (1962)

The door to the law gets short *Schrift*^{xviii}

Having now established the *ins and outs* of writing, let us now return to doors. The kernel of the novel is the so-called Cathedral chapter with the imbedded parable of the doorkeeper. K. is supposed to be taking an important Italian client on a sightseeing tour of the Cathedral, but after waiting a very long time it seems there must have been a misunderstanding. When K. is about to leave, a priest, who is described as a professional sneaker (“berufsmäßige[r] Schleicher”), shows up and seems about to begin the mass (Kafka 212). K. can hardly believe that he alone should represent the parish, but it turns out that the cleric is with the court and knows all about his case. A parallel emerges between K., whom the priest offers an individualized moral lesson, and the man from the country (“der Mann vom Lande”) in the parable, who learns that the door is meant just for him.

The mixture of secular and sacred imagery is jarring. The book in K.’s hand is not a prayer book but a guidebook, and yet the conversation about guilt has distinctly spiritual overtones. Just as K. is beginning to feel comfortable with this kind man of the cloth, the priest tells him to watch for illusions and begins to tell the doorkeeper a parable, which hinges on an illusion: The doorkeeper prohibits entry to the Law even though the Law is supposed to be open and available to all, yet the doorkeeper says to the man: “Wenn es dich so lockt, versuche es doch, trotz meinem Verbot hineinzugehen” (“If it tempts you so much, why not try it in spite of my prohibition”) (Kafka 221). Although the man makes a few feeble attempts to enter, the end result is that he dies waiting in front of *his* door. The tragedy of the parable is revealed in the final line: “Ich gehe jetzt und schließe ihn” (“I’ll go now and close it”), at which point it becomes clear to us that *the door was always already open* (Kafka 222).

The conversation between K. and the priest that follows this passage is highly didactic – for both K. and the reader. A strong authorial presence conveys the message that multiple interpretations are not only possible but also necessary. It is perhaps an ironic parody of the hundreds of literary critics, like myself (and perhaps you too), who will “bang their heads against the door,” in an effort to make sense of this scene. All joking aside, the priest’s lesson on interpretation draws our attention to the act of reading and functions as an instruction manual on how to decipher the novel we have in our hands. K.’s apparent naivety affords an opportunity to educate not only him but all who might want to access the Law.

In my introduction, I outlined my reading of the parable, but it bears repeating: The real tragedy is that there is no obstacle to the Law except the man himself. It is not the doorkeeper who bars entrance but the man’s own blindness. The irony is that he need not enter the door because *he is the door* and so must instead look inside himself for the answers he seeks. The priest says of the doorkeeper, “daß er *das Innere* des Gesetzes nicht kennt, sondern nur *den Weg*” (“doesn’t know *the inside* of the law, only *the way*”), but the reason he doesn’t know the *inner Law* is because he does not realize that the way *is* the door and the door *is* the way (Kafka 225, my emphasis). I’ll go further and say that *the door is the Law* and that the Law is inside the man. What I mean by this is that the parable is not only about some externally imposed Law but also about the Law of the self, and that opening the door to the Law is about discovering one’s

own self, being true to oneself. When I say that the door presents an opening to one's own self or an opportunity to be true to oneself, I do not mean an authentic self but rather an endless supplementarity of self-discovery. Opening the door once will not suffice. Because the subjectivity I invoke here is at once supplementary and simultaneous to itself, it must adhere to the laws of repetition. The parable thus destabilizes any hard distinctions between subject and object, between the man and the door, between the man and the law, or between the man and the doorkeeper. If we accept that the boundaries of self and other are here made porous, K. might then cease to be the victim of his own subjugation and regain a greater sense of agency. I have also proposed that *the novel is a door*. Our reading of K.'s story helps us to understand his life and the world itself, but our true engagement with K.'s struggle affords us an opportunity to wake up to the reality that we too have access to the Law of the self, that we are already inside the Law, that, like K., each one of us is a door, that the door is always already open, and there is no outside to the door.

The priest's patient exegesis of the story parallels the reader's process of interpretation. We are invited to interpret not only the novel but also ourselves in relation to the novel. Much has been made of the references in this chapter to the act of writing and the ways in which this reflects on Kafka's own struggle for self-expression.^{xix} The literary endeavour is thematized by the presence of books, for example the Italian-German dictionary K. uses to prepare for his visit with the business man or the guidebook he brings to the Cathedral, which the priest mistakes for a prayer book. During his analysis of the parable, the priest speaks of writing ("die Schrift"), which takes on a kind of sacred significance. He claims to have recited the tale word for word ("im Wortlaut der Schrift") and rebukes K. for his casual attitude: "Du hast nicht genug Achtung vor der Schrift und veränderst die Geschichte" ("You don't have enough respect for writing and you're changing the story") (222-223). Finally, he warns K. that he will search in vain for answers in the written word: "Die Schrift ist unveränderlich, und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber" ("[The] writing is immutable, and the various meanings are often no more than an expression of despair about this fact") (225). These references no doubt emphasize Kafka's obsession with writing, but I would argue that by pointing over and over again to the *means of communication*, we are reminded that reading and interpreting the word is not an end in itself but the vehicle for self-knowledge. The novel is a door, and so too is the reader the door to self-knowledge which only he himself can open. If Kafka spoke, as he did, about writing "dans le vrai," the only truth is the inner truth, that of being true to oneself.^{xx}

We can thus shed more light now on the opening chapters of *The Trial*. When K. seeks desperately to verify his identity, he fails to convince others of his true nature and his innocence because he is not true to himself. As I have endeavoured to show in the above analysis, the references to representation and reproducibility through the motifs in photography and painting are also linked to the question of K.'s true identity or rather to the impossibility of identity—through external sources of confirmation. In the Cathedral chapter and the parable of the doorkeeper, K. is confronted with his own unseeing ignorance. It dawns on him that he has been standing the whole time in front of an open door—the gift of his life—and has missed the opportunity time and again. K.'s decision to dismiss his lawyer signals a turning point, when he begins to realize that he has been going about managing his trial in the

wrong way and that he must now take things into his own hands. He begins to unravel the layers of self-deceit. The Cathedral scene constitutes an epiphany for K. when the doorkeeper parable reveals to him that the *he is the door* and that in order to be free he needs to open himself and look inside for his inner Law. From this vantage point, the last lines of this chapter also take on a new light: “Das Gericht will nichts von dir. Es nimmt dich auf, wenn du kommst, und es entläßt dich, wenn du gehst” (“The court wants nothing from you. It accepts you when you come and it releases you when you go”) (Kafka 229). This is because K.—and every accused—is not only the defendant but also the lawyer, the judge and the court. K’s only crime is not having lived his life fully, not having opened the door to life.

...für mich bestimmt: K.’s death as his first and final entrance

My reading of K. as a self-victim who finally becomes aware of his victimhood raises interesting parallels with Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony.” In this short story, the Condemned, like K. is subject to an arbitrary justice system, but unlike K. he does not know that he has been condemned and neither does he know the sentence. When the Traveller questions the Officer about this, the Officer replies that the Condemned will experience it on his body. Unlike the condemned man, K. is not only aware that he has been falsely accused but is greatly pained by the circumstances. I have suggested that K. becomes aware of his self-victimhood and that this epiphany causes him to become the agent of his own destiny even as this results in his self-destruction. The Condemned in “In the Penal Colony,” on the other hand, neither experiences the epiphany of self-discovery nor does he have to fight for his freedom, but is rather released just as arbitrarily as he was detained. Considering that Kafka composed “In the Penal Colony” in October 1914 during the time he was working on the manuscript for *The Trial*, we can see in the two works several simultaneous and contradictory possible outcomes for those falsely accused, thus also reinforcing the principle of paradox that characterizes Kafka’s thought.

But K. was not to be so lucky as the Condemned. His end was at once predetermined and arbitrary. Gregor Kalinowski suggests that K.’s death is the result of having withdrawn into the “tucks and folds” of language and that the subject finally becomes so abstract that the protagonist can, “like any subject, simply be changed” (464). While it is tempting to adopt this logic of the impossibility of the writing subject, it leaves many doors unopened. In the final chapter of *The Trial*, two men come to K.’s home and escort their willing convict to his execution. But before they leave, there is quite a fuss about doors: “Nach einer kleinen Förmlichkeit bei der Wohnungstür wegen des ersten Eintretens wiederholte sich die gleiche Förmlichkeit in größerem Umfange vor K.s Tür” (“After some brief formalities at the *door* to the apartment at the time of their arrival, the same formalities were repeated at greater length at K.’s *door*” (233, my emphasis). We never learn the nature of these formalities, but know only that the mysterious ceremony is performed once at the exterior door and then again at the door to K.’s own room. We also learn that K. had indeed been waiting for his guests, dressed for his departure in coat and gloves, just inside his door.

Setting eyes on his captors, K. asks them: “Sie sind also für mich *bestimmt*?” (“You’re here *just* for me?”) (233). There is no good way to capture the German “bestimmt” in the English

translation, but what is noteworthy here is that this is the exact vocabulary used to describe the door in the doorkeeper's parable: "Dieser Eingang war nur für dich *bestimmt*" ("The entrance was *just* for you") (229). The lexical affinity with doors and the specificity of the actions performed *just* for him link K. to the man from the country, but this time giving him a shot at another opening. Toward the end of the last chapter, when he is about to be executed, K. spots a flash of light from a building on the edge of the quarry: "Wie ein Licht aufzuckt, so fuhren die Fensterflügel eines Fensters dort auseinander, ein Mensch, schwach und dünn in der Ferne und Höhe, beugte sich mit einem Ruck *weit vor* und streckte die Arme noch weiter aus." ("With a flickering light, the two halves of the window *opened wide*, and a person, appearing weak and thin through the distance and height, thrust himself outward with a jerk, arms stretched out even further") (236, my emphasis). We are left wondering who this unnamed person is and why he reaches through the open window.

What we do know is that windows and doors offer the promise of openings right to the end. While there is no doubt that K. has met a grisly end at the hands of a sharp and pointy object, I would argue that the open windows and doors point to a new kind of self-knowledge. Like the man from the country who understands—albeit too late—that the door was always open, the open window at the end of this chapter implies that K. has recognized the opening to the self for the first time. At one point just before his death, he muses that at the start of the proceedings he wanted them to be over and that now that they have ended he wants them to start again. This idea of starting again points to the same new beginnings symbolized by the window. It is also a reminder to us as readers to avail ourselves of these doors, to see ourselves as entrances, and indeed to recognize this novel—and the act of reading itself—as a door to greater self-knowledge and self-discovery.

Notes

ⁱ My play on the English “wits” and the German “Witz” points to the importance of acknowledging the cultural origins of Kafka’s *The Trial*. Composed in 1914-1915, less than a decade after the publication of Freud’s *The joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), I want to emphasize the importance of the multi-lingual Austro-Hungarian context, in which Kafka, Freud and their contemporaries were always working in and between languages, increasing the potential for plays on words. The German *Witz*, although it translates as “joke,” is etymologically linked to the English “wit” and was a part of the essential vocabulary in early German Romanticism. Steve McCaffery notes that Friedrich Schlegel used it to mean an explosion of spirit and revolutionary genius, while Novalis invoked *Witz* to point to the principle of affinities and universality of association (qtd. in Radcliffe 1). My reading of Kafka’s prose is located in the German and uses some of the early romantic qualities of *Witz*.

ⁱⁱ Of his reading of *The Trial* to friends, Max Brod writes: “He himself laughed to much that there were moments when he couldn’t read any further” (*Franz Kafka* 178).

ⁱⁱⁱ As a case in point, Orson Welles film of *The Trial* (1962) self-consciously places the doorkeeper parable as a truth that precedes the film adaptation imposing its “grim moral before the movie has a chance to even begin” (Vatulescu 53).

^{iv} My statement that the novel is a door is not entirely original. Jacques Derrida asserts that, “the text would be a door” (“Before the Law” 210). But Derrida goes on to say that, “as [the doorkeeper] closes the object, he closes the text. Which, however, closes on nothing” (210). This is where my reading diverges from that of Derrida. He asserts that the story is tautological, an extreme form of self-referentiality (212). While I do not dispute this statement, I would say that *The Trial* is more than a contemplation of the nature of writing, that it challenges us to see how we have been closing the door on ourselves the whole time.

^v Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* (1971) creates a complex web of intertextual references, in which Kafka’s works figure highly. Like Kafka’s *The Trial*, *Malina* is steeped with the literary traditions of the Habsburgs and has perplexed readers since its inception, not least because it ends when the title character – *ich* / I – disappears into a crack in the wall. For a detailed discussion of the connections between Bachmann’s *Malina* and Kafka’s works, see Karen Achberger’s *Understanding Ingeborg Bachmann*.

^{vi} All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

^{vii} Stanley Corngold cites Theodor Ziolkowski’s supposition that the word “böse” refers to the concept in Austro-Hungarian jurisprudence of “böser Vorsatz” (“malicious intent”) (61, 221 n31).

^{viii} Corngold credits the work of Malcolm Pasley and Roland Reuß for sleuthing out the larger consequences of this decision (59), continuing to agree with their comments all the way to the penultimate chapter. Corngold says he is in the same cathedral as Pasley and Reuß but that he is in a different pew by virtue of his conclusion that the parable scene allows Kafka to fuse with his character, K.

^{ix} The initials of “Franz Benannten” (literally, the one named Franz), F.B. are the same as those of Felice Bauer, with whom Kafka had broken off his engagement just before beginning work on *The Trial*. She had made her presence in “Das Urteil” as Frieda Brandenfeld and there is little doubt that Felice is alluded to in the character of Fräulein Bürstner. K. has difficult relations with both “Franz Benannten” and Fräulein Bürstner, and the fact that the trouble is with both genders suggests that the conflict with his fiancée goes beyond the issue of marriage. Corngold suggests further that the similarity in consonants between Grubach and Grete Bloch establishes a link to the woman who would replace Felice as Kafka’s female companion (55). Looking once again at the name of his fictional character, we note that Bürstner resembles the word “Burste,” or brush, conjuring up associations with both prickly bristles and a utensil to comb down one’s unruly hair or brush away dirt and lint.

^x Continuing with the royal allusions, it is interesting to speculate whether the name of the second officer, Willem, might be a reference to Crown Prince Wilhelm of Prussia, Franz Joseph’s major rival. Following this allegory, K. would find himself at the mercy of two powerful monarchs.

^{xi} Benjamin writes: “The technology of reproduction detaches the produced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (254). Thus the photographs point to the original while denying its uniqueness.

^{xii} This relates to the point I make in my discussion of Stanley Corngold’s reading, that K. is a victim because the law cannot be written.

^{xiii} The German word for rumour – *Gerücht* – varies from the word court – *Gericht* – by only one vowel.

^{xiv} This passage also illustrates the play of bodies and doors, invoking the fluid pleasure of movement in and out. Annie Ring argues that *The Trial* develops a hermeneutics of pleasure or pleasurable unpleasure. She explains that the description of tactile experiences demonstrates that “K.’s experiences of pleasure and torment are bound up with one another” (307) and that the play of tactility subverts the “the experience of being *in the law’s hands* becomes for K. a literal one, focused around manual function (and dysfunction) in the text” (313, original emphasis).

^{xv} For the record, the word “Tür” shows up fifty-four times in this chapter.

^{xvi} Malcolm Pasley finds that Kafka’s writing “doesn’t know where it is going and lets itself be carried along by the developing story” (209), but I would rather say that there is a very deliberate nature to each sentence and its connection to the next.

^{xvii} The Viennese Jew, Karl Kraus, was a contemporary of Kafka’s, an influential satirical journalist and a controversial cultural critic. Kafka attended several of Kraus’s lectures and followed his writings, but no correspondence remains. Kafka tried at one point to intervene on behalf of his friend, Max Brod, whom Kraus had heavily criticized (Brod, *Streitbares* 73).

^{xviii} *Schrift* is the German word for “writing.”

^{xix} Gregor Kalinowski points to the play on the word “hand” in the Tintorelli chapter and the German “Handlung,” meaning plot and how this relates to the “hand’s cont(r)act with language: the pen, paper and ink of negotiation, the ceaseless striving to settle with language” (461). Taken to its logical extreme, the addiction to writing that is never sufficient, requires the narrator to inscribe his own death sentence, whereby the plot – “die Handlung” – costs him his life (462).

^{xx} Derrida addresses the question of truth in his discussion of “Before the Law,” writing that the truth of law “is this non-truth which Heidegger calls the truth of truth” (206). He goes on to say that this “truth without truth, it *guards itself*, it guards itself without doing so, guarded by a doorkeeper who guards nothing, the door remaining open—and open on nothing” (206). While I agree with Derrida that the truth guards itself, I do not agree that the door opens to nothing. As I stated in my opening and will reiterate in my conclusion, the door in the parable is the door to the self.

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