

# Gesture: Kafka's Means to Silence

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"Of that which has been written on [Kafka], little counts; most is existentialism."<sup>1</sup> The existentialist position, thus generalized by Adorno to the near totality of criticism on Kafka, is, according to him, a confusion of genres. It stems from the assumption that Kafka's mode was realistic symbolism, whereas realistic and symbolic are mutually exclusive modes of representation. Adorno's argument leads away from the notion that one can subject Kafka's figures to an interrogation that will yield a meaning that obliterates them as mere signifiers of an unstated truth. For him "each sentence is literal and each signifies. The two moments are not merged, as the symbol would have it, but yawn apart and out of the abyss between them blinds the glaring ray of fascination."<sup>2</sup> The existence of two parallel systems, which do not meet except in the short-circuit of the reader's intervention, signals the allegorical mode. But the bifocal nature of allegory requires that both chains of associations, that is, the literal and the significant, be recognizable and remain embedded in the mental operation that unlocks the allegorical system. Without access to the significant the allegory does not come into effect. We are left with an incomprehensible literalness, obliged to take it at face value for whatever meaning it affords. This is precisely the sort of predicament Adorno's reading of Kafka unveils: "It expresses itself not through expression but by its repudiation, by breaking off. It is a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen. . . . Each sentence says 'interpret me', and none will permit it."<sup>3</sup> Of course there is no contradiction between Adorno's demand for more complete interpretation than existentialism provides, and his discovery that Kafka's sentence flirts with the reader's intellect. And although he dismisses the possibility of making this fact the clue to our understanding of the work, it seems fair enough to ask about the reason for this suggestive power of literalness. Kafka's restatement of the sirens episode in *The Odyssey* is pertinent at this point: "But the sirens have one weapon more terrible than their song, and that is their silence. It may never have happened but it is perhaps not unthinkable that some may have escaped their song, but no one has ever escaped their silence." Whatever the song might have been, Kafka dismisses it as of secondary importance only. The universal, unavoidable and crushing feature of these allegorical bodies is that they express nothing, their song dissolving the mistified illusion of the allegorical seafarer. If the parable of the sirens has any bearing on the Kafkian mode, it is precisely in showing that the impossibility of interpretation--if it is indeed true that all interpretation is abrogated--is not just a matter of style, a particular fondness for concreteness, but a worldview, a particular interpretation of reality that brings its author very close to the existentialist position. There is, I believe, no circular reasoning in my argument. I do not extract an interpretation out of Kafka's non-interpretible sentences; my reading of the sirens parable is not cancelled by the silence issuing from its subject. For Kafka's lucidity is precisely in the sphere of negation, in his unhesitating withdrawal from a certainty that eludes its seekers. Clearly, the very determination of his denial of transcendence is a positive fact, formulated time and again in his works.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981) 245.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno 246.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno 246

*The Trial* states this theme of denial *ab initio*. A man of robust appearance, dressed in a black suit full of pleats, pockets, buckles, and buttons which give him an air of practicality, "though one could not quite tell what actual purpose it served," enters Joseph K.'s room when he is still in bed. "Who are you?" asked K., only to this effect: "But the man ignored the question, as though his appearance needed no explanation, and merely said: 'Did you ring?'"<sup>4</sup> By the end of the first paragraph in the novel Kafka has so succeeded in creating an air of mystery, an uncanny emanation of the everyday, that the reader glides over the silence surrounding K.'s question and attributes it to the visitor's uncivility, to the matter-of-factness and practicality with which this stranger conducts his exchange with K. The rest of the novel, however, consists of a manyfold illustration of man's approaches to the principle of fascination being met with a terrible silence. When K. opens the examining magistrate's books in the hope of finding the principles of the legislation by which he is to be judged, his curiosity is deflected by the concreteness of what he sees therein. Instead of the abstractions that law represents with regard to human behavior, he sees "A man and a woman . . . sitting naked on a sofa." And even this picture is devoid of any clear meaning due to the inability of the artist. On the contrary, it points unmistakably to its material features, to the lines which, drawn by a better artist, would have obliterated themselves in suggesting the shapes they evoke.

The most telling instance of this state of affairs is the parable of the doorkeeper at the door of the law, told to K. by the priest at the cathedral. The multiplication of theological readings of the parable and the sophistry applied to such interpretations--at one point the priest says that according to the commentators it is possible simultaneously to understand one thing and to be mistaken about it--is an exercise in the kind of subtlety designed to befuddle the mind. This is precisely what happens to K., for whom "The simple story had lost its clear outline, he wanted to put it out of his mind" (*Trial* 247). Initially intended to clarify his mind, the parable has only succeeded in making him withdraw from all reflection about his own case. Thus it dispels his last hope to extricate himself from the mystery surrounding him, an effect that finds its allegorical counterpart in the extinguishing of the lamp he was carrying to find his way inside the cathedral.

The novel ends as it began, in the complete lack of articulation of the fate befalling man. Heinz Politzer has written that "most of [Kafka's] narratives are basically endless: they consist of an infinite sequence of tortured moments of metaphysical anguish and despair, produced by the absence of any metaphysical frame of reference. But when he reaches the end (of his strength and patience rather than of his tale), he is forced either to interrupt his work or to use costumes and masks."<sup>5</sup> In *The Trial* this either . . . or condition does not obtain. It is rather a both this and that. For the imagery at the close of the novel is perfectly theatrical, even self-referentially so: "What theatre are you playing at?" K. asks his executioners. "Perhaps they are tenors," he thinks, seeing their double chins (*Trial* 250). But K.'s theatrical death is no conclusion to the foregoing story, which, lacking a plot, cannot have an outcome. K.'s death, then, is not so much a conclusion as an interruption. It reveals nothing, although a familiar point is stressed, and, as it were, secured by the insistence of its return. This piece of knowledge is, again, that the world affords no meaning, no certainty, into which the events of one's life could be translated; nor does death, by closing the circle, disclose any pattern underlying those events or a revelation of their necessity. K.'s last siren is the man who, at a window high up above the street, reaches out into the void. "Who was it? A friend? A good man? Someone who sympathized? Someone who wanted to help? Was it one person only? Or was it mankind? Was help at hand? Were these arguments in his favour that had been overlooked? Of course there must be. Logic is doubtless unshakable, but it cannot withstand a man who wants to go on living. Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the

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<sup>4</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956) 7.

<sup>5</sup> Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966) 212.

High Court, to which he had never penetrated? He raised his hands and spread out all of his fingers."<sup>6</sup> (*Trial* 254-55) It is K.'s last attempt to commune with humanity, based on an interpretation of what, in utter precision, is only silence: a gesture that suggests all questions and answers none. It merges with another gesture, the equally meaningless one of plunging the knife three times into K.'s heart.

The intranscendental nature of these acts embraces K.'s own. It is useless to ask about the meaning of his raised hands and spread out fingers. They stand neither for an attitude of self-defense, nor for a sign of blessing.<sup>7</sup> His last words--"Like a dog!"--disclose the meaninglessness of his final motion, this being indistinguishable from the involuntary spasms of a dog that has been run over by a car. Both, words and gesture are not demonstrative of either character or intention. They just are, and their occurrence defeats even that ambiguity postulated by some critics as the intellectual atmosphere of the novel. For ambiguity, no matter into how many types it is declined, presupposes the existence of more than one meaning, whose plausibility cannot totally override that of its alternatives. It is not a plethora of meaning but the utter exhaustion of meaning that confronts Joseph K. His predicament, however, stems as much from his failure to derive meaning out of his immediate situation, as from the allurements this situation engenders in him only to increase his bafflement and spur him on to his destruction. His increasing obsession with the trial depends not only on his desire to understand the reason behind his arrest, but even more on his perfectly correct persuasion that his life is at stake.

This thematic situation matches Theodor Adorno's explanation for the power of Kafka's sentences to command interpretation while at the same time barring it.<sup>8</sup> For Kafka truly succeeds in convincing the reader that his hero's fate lies at the heart of our predicament in the twentieth century. If modernist authors attempt to destroy the contemplative relation between text and reader only to reestablish it in terms of psychological participation, this effort is true of Kafka *a fortiori*.<sup>9</sup> He manages to transmit to the reader the unrest and obsessions that agitate his main characters. If one asks oneself the reason for such an induction of emotional conflict in the reader, the very question draws attention to Kafka's protagonist. Whether he be named Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, or his name be reduced to a laconic gesture, the ambiguous and finally non-referential letter K. in *The Castle*, he is the co-sufferer, a man whose experience is able to evoke the reader's anguish about his own. For it is this protagonist's identity that ultimately accounts for the reader's involvement in the interpretive effort. Unlike the exorbitant figures of popular literature and the cinema, his destiny, even when thrown into the wildest of nightmares, does not satisfy a voyeuristic maneuver to escape the commonplace. On the contrary, as Philip Rahv pointed out for both K. and Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, "their heresy consists simply of their typicality."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Although I respect the text of the translation throughout my quotations, I do not subscribe to the translators' capitalization of the titles of court officials and of the court itself. Capitalization of nouns is normative in German, but to keep it selectively in the translation suggests the type of metaphysical interpretation that is in question in this essay.

<sup>7</sup> Politzer 217.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno 246.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Faulkner asserts that modernist writers, influenced by psychological investigation, emphasized the role of the agent in creating the reality which he experiences. *Modernism* (London: Methuen, 1977). In terms of the relation between reader and text this means, of course, that the reader will henceforth be engaged in the actualization of the psychological process energized by the author. The most obvious instance of this participation is, of course, stream of consciousness narration, which the reader can decode only to the extent that he or she shares in the process of mental configuration undergone by the character.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Rahv, "The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Joseph K.," in *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) 40.

Joseph K.'s and Gregor Samsa's circumstances are far from extraordinary, though by no means vulgar. Both the bank clerk and the salesman are successful individuals in their trade; they enjoy their bosses' confidence, their careers hold out the promise of early promotion. In both instances self-abnegation in regard to their jobs and an all but ascetic way of life make these young men exemplars of the petty ideals fostered by the European conversion of religious zeal into productive subordination to lay authorities. The realistic details carefully garnered by Kafka make up, in Georg Lukács's words, "the world of modern capitalism, seen as a form of hell on earth,"<sup>11</sup> a recognition that is far from alien to contemporary readers, who can identify Samsa's impossible transmogrification as a fantastic occurrence of the perfectly ordinary phenomenon of dehumanization by the tremendous power released by the secularization of transcendental coercion. K.'s typicality stems from the fact, that, irrespective of his personal circumstances, he never steps outside the boundaries of the reader's conception of the everyday, even if *this* everyday does not exactly match the reader's. If in Joyce's epic Leopold Bloom, being quite peculiar in origin, character and activities, has, nonetheless, struck readers as a fairly acceptable instance of modern Everyman, no doubt on account of the utter banality of his situation, Kafka achieves a similar effect for his protagonists with precisely the inverse method: a perfectly ordinary character, striving to maintain an absolutely ordinary behavior in the most bizarre of situations. If both authors succeed in suggesting a certain definition of modern humanity, the final effects their works have on the reader are, like their methods, inversions of each other. Joyce deflates the claims of eccentricity by analyzing it into its finer components of basic humanity; Kafka writes to shake us from the banal order of the everyday and the assumption of established motives.

If the reduction of myth to banality holds out the promise of communication to the point of redundancy--a strategy brought out by Joyce's intimations of a discernible pattern of meaning behind his intricate stylistics--Kafka's sabotage of matter-of-fact language and narrative style aims at the disruption of communicative habits. Everything in his style happens as if interpretation were smoothly feasible, yet inexorably the reader comes up against the uninterpretable. This can be seen at work in one of Kafka's most prominent devices, namely, the recourse to gesture. The attention he bestows on gesture, unparalleled in modernist literature, is a function of his engrossment with the enigma of concreteness. For gesture is ultimately not the incarnation of an abstract reality, psychological or eschatological, but stark-staring reality, inexpressible, obscure in the utterness of its being.

Kafka's absorption in a particular gesture might lead him on occasion to construct a simple plot around one or two such enigmatic occurrences, not in order to explain them, but to heighten their effect and recreate the shock that brought his attention to them in the first place. Walter Benjamin pointed out the relationship between Kafka's increasing mastery and his diminishing interest in either explaining or adapting gestures to common situations--that is, rationalizing them.<sup>12</sup> It is this lack of rationalization, preserved in the midst of situations calling for such an epistemological approach, that prompted Adorno's apparently condemnatory dictum. He wrote of Kafka that "not *verum* but *falsum* is *index sui*."<sup>13</sup> Adorno is, in fact, attacking interpretations of Kafka in terms of philosophical doctrine. The fault, however, does not lie entirely with the critics. It is Kafka, he says, that misleads his readers by intentionally outlining his two great novels, *The Castle* and *The Trial* in the form of philosophical theorems.<sup>14</sup> We are reminded that it is a major

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<sup>11</sup> Georg Lukács, *Against a Misunderstood Realism*. 86-88 of the original (*Wider den missverstandenen Realismus*, 1957) trans. Allan Blunden and J.P. Stern. In *The World of Franz Kafka*, ed. J.P. Stern (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980) 182

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 121.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno 247.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno 247.

aesthetic error to equate the philosophy which an author infuses in his work with its metaphysical substance. We can assume that Adorno has in mind episodes such as that of the doorkeeper and the law, where a certain degree of abstraction steals into the work, thus tempting critics to make the easy operation of extrapolating a ready-made thesis from the novel. But when all is said and this particular danger is averted, the question remains whether the metaphysical substance of the work is expressible in terms of a philosophical position. This is particularly important in the light of Adorno's rejection of a large part of Kafka criticism under the label of existentialism. Clearly, if the principle "only fidelity to the letter, not oriented understanding, can be of help" were pushed to its logical conclusion, then criticism would find itself at the cul-de-sac of textual duplication. The only valid approach to Kafka's works would be to reflect them rather than reflecting on them; explanation giving way before the invocation of the object itself, logic coming under the sway of magic.

If there is an ontological statement in Kafka's works, it refers to the utterness of being that has been mentioned a propos of gesture. The notion that things do not owe their being to an organizing principle which bestows existence (or withdraws it) in axiological terms is foremost in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and central in stories like *The Hunger Artist* and *The Great Wall of China*, narratives that attain to virtuosity in their effort to demythologize experience. Whether or not this baring of experience can be justifiably mythologized in turn as "the reality of the curse,"<sup>15</sup> depends on one's metaphysical loyalties, but Erich Heller is right in asserting that this reality "constitutes the ruthlessly compelling logic of Kafka's writings," and that this logic "is a reflex movement of his being and shares the irrefutability of all that is."<sup>16</sup>

For gesture in Kafka is not--as Adorno thought--the carrier of a universal that can be unveiled by taking off the layers of common sense that becloud its significance.<sup>17</sup> It is not the realm of significance that has been repressed by the commonplace, but rather the opposite. Gestures in the Kafkian mode redefine the commonplace not by making it significant, but by widening the gap between it and ourselves, to the purpose of showing in exaggerated relief the degree of alienation that is man's lot in his habitual course. This point is finely brought home by the Czech philosopher Karel Kosik in his *Dialectics of Concreteness*: "The everyday familiar world is not a world we know and recognize. In order that this world may be presented in its reality, it must be torn out of its fetishistic intimacy and revealed in its alienated brutality."<sup>18</sup>

The sense in which it can be said of Kafka that falsity is his mark, that he misleads the reader, is no other than the insinuation that gestures can be analyzed and forced to contribute a truth more solid than words. Kafka's narrative technique involves, next to the aggressiveness with which gestures are thrown before our attention, the violence done to these gestures by an effort to expose their psychological content. The violence of the attempt carries, however, its own antidote, as if Kafka himself wished to call attention to his artifice and disqualify all exegeses by underscoring their inadequacy. Interpretations that lie side by side in crass unrelatedness are not conducive to unraveling the enigma; rather they disclose the absurdity of the attempt. We have already seen some examples: the priest's hermeneutical sophistry muddling the implications of the parable about the doorkeeper and the law against Joseph K.'s straightforward but premature inference; the

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<sup>15</sup> Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1971) 201.

<sup>16</sup> Heller 201

<sup>17</sup> Adorno 249.

<sup>18</sup> Karel Kosik, *Dialectics of Concreteness*. A fragment of the book has been translated by J.P. Stern in *The World of Franz Kafka* 187.

crowding out by a plethora of possibilities of any one acceptation for the gesture of the man who, leaning out of the window, reaches out his arms on witnessing K.'s execution. Or does he not do it on account of K., over whose death would then fall the stone of supreme indifference?

But it may prove more revealing to select a less protruding instance of Kafka's recourse to rationalization in the wake of the gesture. It is in these less salient examples that his obsession with exploring his own interpretive fallacy is found to constitute the groundwork of his narratives. Enigmas that promise an answer about man's fate can be seen as privileged moments of a kind with smaller fragments of reality. Such fragments would pass unnoticed under the guise of the commonplace if attention were not directed to them by a flagrantly insufficient articulation, which by missing the point makes one wonder about the miss. Joseph K. is taken to a lawyer by his uncle Albert. Leni, the maid, introduces the visitors to Huld's dark bedroom: "Leni, who is it?" asked the lawyer who, blinded by the candlelight, could not recognize his visitors. 'It's your old friend Albert,' said K.'s uncle. 'Oh, Albert,' said the lawyer, sinking back on his pillow again, as if there were no need to keep up appearances before this visitor" (*Trial* 112). What is the connection between this letting oneself fall back upon the pillow and the suggestion that Huld appeared to have nothing to keep from his visitor? Would this gesture normally be taken to connote one's sincerity and openness? The answer cannot be that Huld is giving up the pretense of being in a healthier condition than he really is. For that pretense could not be sustained in view of the abnormality of being found in bed at a relatively early hour in the evening. Huld makes no effort whatsoever to disguise his physical condition, as is to be inferred from the fact that the neighbors know of that condition and the maid uses it to keep visitors from disturbing the lawyer. Besides, we should not forget that in an unlit corner of the room another visitor, the chief clerk of the court has been sitting since K. and uncle Albert came in. Surely the lawyer would not keep up any pretense before this witness. Huld's gesture could sooner be taken to suggest fatigue overpowering his curiosity, or the release of tension after ascertaining the intruder's identity. Kafka's translation into the rhetoric of sincerity and disguise is, however, pertinent to the intimacy that he wants to show as forming the bond between Huld and uncle Albert. It is also, indirectly, a reflection on K.'s state as an accused man, that is, as somebody who might be hiding something from others, and thus it brings into relief the subliminal difference between K. and the other people in the room. But it is not an adequate translation of the gesture which it purports to render.

Bordering on the nature of the neurotic symptom (the structural similarity is strong enough to have triggered a fair amount of psychoanalytic interpretations of Kafka's fiction), in Kafka gesture is a declaration of the split between bodily behavior and its control by the mind. K.'s death is not different from this order of things. The two second rate actors who stage his execution are not of a mind with their action; for the first time in modern literature the death of a central character is put on the level of guignol. Action resolved into gesture is devoid of motivation; it cannot be rationalized in terms of ethics or shown to entail a moment of transcendence, the very stuff of which tragedy is made. It is not Richard B. Sewall, by adding *The Trial* to his primer on tragedy,<sup>19</sup> but Philip Rahv who, by showing the inappropriateness of such addition, understands the tenth chapter of this novel. "Tragedy," he reminds us, "implies that the hero, though vanquished by fate, commemorates in his very defeat the greatness and importance of man."<sup>20</sup> Kafka's curt epitaph for Joseph K.--"Like a dog!"--is loud enough to dispel any illusion of triumph in defeat. It is the unimpeachable denial of transcendence, the assertion that death is a

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<sup>19</sup> Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980) 140-60. He is plainly on the wrong track when he states about *The Trial* that "The progression in the novel is towards values, not toward a denial of them or toward the no-decision of total ambiguity. The function of tragedy as the critical and creative approach to the mystery of man's suffering has been fulfilled"; 160.

<sup>20</sup> Rahv 52-3.

gesture like any other, even if it is the last one. It defeats the notion of spiritual progress by defeating the notion of spirit altogether. What is the shame that lasts longer than words if not the final relinquishing of all tightly clasped ideas about human worth and personal dignity? K.'s lack of progress in the struggle for human affirmation sheds light on a structural quality of Kafka's novels, often remarked upon as either an incapacity for providing conclusions<sup>21</sup> or as monotony arising from repetition.<sup>22</sup> It is not the insistence on the uncertain, the reiteration of the ambiguous,<sup>23</sup> but the need to affirm the collapse of the idea of progress fictionally, i.e., in time, that is responsible for Kafka's serialized episodes that lead nowhere and eventually end up against a wall. Adorno offers a clear-eyed formulation of this state of affairs in a sentence that is also a summing up of *The Trial*: "The crucial moment, however, towards which everything in Kafka is directed, is that in which men become aware that they are not themselves--that they themselves are things."<sup>24</sup> The dissolution of the subject is indeed an important factor in keeping Kafka apart from existentialist jargon. It is, nevertheless, a conclusion that could be demanded of existentialism in the name of consistency. The collapse of humanism is thorough and leaves nothing for hope to grasp. The world is shown in the light not of the flames of hell, but in the dim glimmer of a reality from which the light of reason has vanished.

It would be missing the point to make *The Trial* stand for the nihilistic novel which it is not. It is neither the epic of damnation, nor does it represent the madness of desperation.<sup>25</sup> It would be closer to the truth to assert, by extrapolating a sentence from *The Trial*, that logic breaks down before a man who wants to live (*Trial* 196). Life is not the source of Kafka's doubts; nor is it the object of his denial. In its concreteness life is and will continue to be. Like gesture it asserts its precedence over the blundered attempts on the part of man to bring it in line with his self-delusions of dignity, justice, reason, and the rest. Assertions are perhaps the last thing that one should attempt with Kafka, but in the mood of absurdity that all such attempts evoke in Kafka's reader, I will venture that this unambiguous respect for life in the face of man's ungraceful defeat is the import of Kafka's enigmatic statement to Max Brod, that there is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope--but not for us."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Politzer 212.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno 254.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno 254.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno 255.

<sup>25</sup> Heller 202.

<sup>26</sup> Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1947) 75.