

6-1-2011

## “Don’t Trust Anybody, Not Even Us”: Kafka’s Realism as Anarchist Modernism

Jesse Cohn

*Purdue University North Central*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Cohn, Jesse (2011) "“Don’t Trust Anybody, Not Even Us”: Kafka’s Realism as Anarchist Modernism," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 2, Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1752>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

## “Don’t Trust Anybody, Not Even Us”: Kafka’s Realism as Anarchist Modernism

### Abstract

Franz Kafka’s personal interest in and contact with the anarchist movement have been fairly well documented, and many have pointed to affinities between his work and anarchist ideas. At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has documented the influence of anarchist politics on modernist aesthetics per se, primarily in terms of a shared resistance to representation—a project that Kafka appears not to share, or at least one he pursues in a very different way. This essay redescribes the strategies of representation found at work in novels such as *The Trial* and stories such as “The Refusal” in relation to anarchism, and thereby to contribute to a better understanding both of Kafka’s political engagements and his unique form of narrative realism.

### Keywords

Franz Kafka, Kafka, anarchist ideas, anarchy, modernist aesthetics, modernism, The Trial, The Refusal, narrative realism, politics, Der Process, Der Prozess, Der Process

## “Don’t Trust Anybody, Not Even Us”: Kafka’s Realism as Anarchist Modernism

Jesse Cohn

*Purdue University North Central*

Will [the multitude] ... replace old masters by new ones? Let it do its own work if it wants that to be done, and confide it to representatives if it wishes to be betrayed.

— Peter Kropotkin (239)

Betrayed! Betrayed!

— Franz Kafka (*Metamorphosis* 143)

On a rainy afternoon, Joseph K., having been for some time now accused by a mysterious but implacable Court, having finally dismissed his ineffectual lawyer, and gloomily aware that his case is not going well, meets a priest in an otherwise empty, darkened cathedral. Through conversation, it becomes apparent that this priest is also connected with the Court—in fact, that he is the prison chaplain, and is fully familiar with K.’s case. Clutching at the possibility that this man has good intentions, K. decides to appeal to him for advice. What he wishes for now is no longer to find somebody who can intervene on his behalf—another *Advokat* ‘lawyer’ or *Vertreter* ‘legal representative’ to speak for him (186)—but to learn how to sidestep it, to “break out of it,” to “live outside the trial” (214):

Surely that possibility existed; K. had thought about it often in the recent past. If the priest knew of such a possibility, he might reveal it if asked, even though he himself was part of the court....  
(*Trial*, 214)<sup>1</sup>

In his desperation, K. makes just such an appeal: “You’re an exception among those who belong to the court ... I trust you more than I do any of them,” he says (215). The priest’s warning reply, “Don’t

deceive yourself” is followed by the parable of the “man from the country [who] ... requests admittance to the Law” (215-17). Dying at the threshold of the Law, having spent the remainder of his life in a futile effort to persuade the doorkeeper to let him pass, he is told: “No one else could gain admittance here, because this entrance was meant solely for you. I’m going to go and shut it now” (*Trial* 217).

As if in an effort to preempt the exegeses to which the novel would be subjected, K. and the priest then compete to interpret the story—a disputation at the heart of which is the question of trust and betrayal, of truth and deception. Together, they consider: Has the doorkeeper cruelly deceived the earnest petitioner, or has he earnestly represented a paradoxical truth? Is the doorkeeper in possession of the truth, or is he himself a victim of deception? Should we question the doorkeeper’s representations at all, or are they beyond question simply because of the authority he represents? (217-23). Here, just as K. comes tantalizingly close, not to finding entry to the Law, but to exiting the process that the entire novel constitutes (and that gives it its German title, *Der Prozeß*, meaning both “The Trial” and “The Process”), he unwittingly reprises the role of the man from the country, the humble petitioner seeking admittance (Derrida, *Acts of Literature* 217). Wearied by the priest’s terrific display of sophistry, which drives him back and forth between mutually contradictory interpretations of the story, K. comes to the “depressing conclusion” that “[l]ies are made into a universal system [*Weltordnung*]” (Kafka, *Trial* 223).<sup>2</sup>

What a trap! K. is not entirely mistaken to conclude that the priest has given a kind of universal victory to falsehood: he has indeed shown the system of representation itself to be inherently unstable, untrustworthy, deceptive. What K. fails to grasp, as he relapses into his desire for certainty and finality, is that this interpretive swerving also demonstrates the incoherence of the Law to which he craves admittance. To imagine a way of life that is outside the Law, that is before it (temporally) or beyond it (spatially)—what could this be but the most radical of all political ideas, the very idea of anarchy? And yet: if this possibility is what K. imagines, however darkly, what could be more comically pathetic than hoping, hopelessly, for a priest to reveal it? Isn’t the priest—who is, after all,

another agent of the Court—being terribly truthful when he warns K. not to trust him, like the Cretan of the famous paradox who announces "I am lying"? What would K. have done differently, how might he have lived his life, had he been able to follow the priest's maxim: "Don't deceive yourself"? (215-17).

In Joseph K.'s world, almost anyone, even those to whom one looks for emancipation, may be linked to the Court. Alternatively, "[i]n the first part of [the twentieth] century," according to the authors of a recent volume on twentieth-century Czech intellectual life, "the artistic and literary endeavors of leading Czech writers and artists, more often than not, were linked to anarchism" (Nový et al 192).<sup>3</sup> There is certainly no shortage of such links where Franz Kafka is concerned. First of all, a number of sources allege that, at the invitation of his friend and correspondent, a poet, journalist, and active anarchist named Michal Mareš, who gave him a copy of Peter Kropotkin's *Reden eines Rebellen, Words of a Rebel*, he attended meetings of the Czech anarchist circle, the Klub Mladých; there, he became acquainted with Czech modernists of anarchist tendency such as Stanislav Kostka Neumann, who would later publish Milená Jesenská's Czech translations of Kafka (Wagenbach 72-73; Urzidil 190; Dodd 27; Pawel 447).<sup>4</sup> Even if these accounts of direct contact with the anarchist movement are discounted, no one disputes his familiarity with anarchist ideas through his reading: he read works by anarchists such as Kropotkin, Gustav Landauer, Émile Verhaeren, Mareš, Fráňa Šrámek, and Octave Mirbeau (Pan 5-6; Born et al 211-12, 221, 213, 44, 42); Mirbeau's dark novel *The Torture Garden* has been identified as a primary source for Kafka's own "In the Penal Colony" (Burns; Anderson 177n5). Numerous references to Mikhail Bakunin, Kropotkin, Landauer, and Ernst Toller are to be found among Kafka's diary entries and letters (Kafka, *Diaries 1914-1923*, 118; *Diaries 1910-1913*, 303; *Letters to Friends* 237).

Moreover, although some have alleged that Kafka's interest in anarchism was transitory, his correspondence indicates that it did not disappear with the outbreak of the First World War. In 1917, he continued to read Franz Pfemfert's literary journal, *Die Aktion*, which regularly published works by anarchists such as Kropotkin, Bakunin, Rudolf Rocker, Erich Mühsam, Fritz Brupbacher, and Eli-sée Reclus, as well as Verhaeren, Neumann, Šrámek, and Otto Gross

(Pfemfert 7.32, 2.69, 2.91, 5.57, 3.14), and several of his own stories were published alongside Landauer's essays in Neumann's *Kmen* and in *Der Jude*, the journal founded by their mutual friend, Martin Buber (Jamison 65n7; Institut für Textkritik). Kafka also planned to become involved with Gross's project for an anarchist journal, to be titled *Blätter zur Bekämpfung des Machtwillens* 'Journal for the Suppression of the Will to Power' (Brod 108; Kafka, *Letters to Friends* 153, 167, 455n65). Only a few years before his death, and after the formal collapse of the organized Czech anarchist movement, Kafka seems to have remained avidly interested in anarchism (Gustav Janouch dates his first conversations with Kafka on this subject by reference to Mareš's book, *Přicházím z periferie* 'I Come From the Periphery' first published in 1920 [Tomek 32-33; Born et al 193; Janouch 86-91, 207n33]); in any case, letters of 1922 find him still in contact with Mareš, whose work he is still reading with enthusiasm (Kafka, *Letters to Friends* 158, 165, 176, 153, 167, 455n65; Hayman 286; Kafka, *Letters to Milena* 226).

And yet what would be the point of yet another argument that Kafka should be classified as an anarchist writer? Most of the literature on this subject goes little further than cataloguing these kinds of connections, then dutifully noting the thematic connections between anarchism and Kafka's fiction—authority, bureaucracy, hierarchy, power, and so on, frequently condensed into the recurring figure of "the Law."<sup>5</sup> The problem with these readings is that they conveniently overlook the ambiguity of this figure and of Kafka's work as a whole. What exactly would it mean to attribute a political position to these writings?

A new wave of scholarship now makes it possible to rethink these questions from a fresh angle. This scholarship had yet to appear two decades ago, when critics such as Ritchie Robertson were able to dismiss Kafka's engagement with anarchism as apocryphal or irrelevant (139-41).<sup>6</sup> Since then, numerous studies have rediscovered the role of anarchist politics in the development of modernist avant-garde aesthetics—particularly in the visual arts, but also in literature. When we look more closely at the affiliation of Ezra Pound's fragmentary, hermetic poetry, for example, with the anarchist politics of Dora Marsden's journal, *The Egoist*, we can see the link between them in terms of a kind of politicized individualism

contesting capitalism, the state, and patriarchy—"a supreme egoism," in the words of Tristan Tzara, "wherein laws become insignificant" (qtd. in Resina 375). As Uri Eisenzweig remarks, the link between anarchism and modernism is in "the fact of a common resistance to the principle of representation," or in other words, "anarchist resistance to the legitimacy of narrative power" (81, 85, my trans.). Similar relationships to anarchist ideas appear in Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolism, Camille Pissarro's Neo-Impressionism, Jean Cocteau's Surrealism, Alfred Jarry's absurdism, Pablo Picasso's Cubism, Hugo Ball's Dada, Toller's Expressionism, Kazimir Malevich's Constructivism, and, in Prague itself, Neumann's Decadence and František Kupka's Abstraction. Behind the proliferation of different "anti-Realist styles," as Harry Redner argues, "from the emotional distortions and exaggerations of Expressionism to the complete non-representation of pure Abstraction," lies "an anti-representationalist aesthetic"—an aesthetic "anarchism" (288). What emerges, in short, is really a whole new political history of modernism, one which includes, along with fascist and progressive variants, an "anarchist modernism" (Kadlec 2-3; Antliff). This rediscovered context gives fresh relevance to the hypothesis of an anarchist dimension in Kafka.

As soon as we turn back to Kafka, however, we can quickly see how giving him the same treatment as Ball, Picasso, and Kupka could be difficult. First of all, Kafka resists groupings and classifications; he is neither a Surrealist nor an Expressionist nor a partisan of any other -ism. He belongs nowhere: "I have hardly anything in common with myself" (Kafka, *Diaries 1914-1923* 11). Moreover, his work seems to lack an essential trait of avant-garde modernism—indeed, the trait which most strongly links modernism to anarchism: its "resistance to representation" (Kadlec 2). He does not, like Mallarmé, go "on strike against society," shunning common or public language in favor of a transcendent "incommunicabilité" (Mallarmé qtd. in Halperin 50, my trans. Porter 11). As readers from Susan Sontag to Wilhelm Emrich have noted, Kafka's works, particularly in their use of the genre of parable, do not forbid but actively solicit (and sometimes, as in the cathedral scene in *The Trial*, actually rehearse in advance) exemplary or figurative readings (Sontag 29; Emrich 81). At the same time, these works are written in a basically realis-

tic idiom, reflecting recognizable features of the modern, everyday world, and if this world is often represented as behaving in a bizarre or irrational manner, this by no means negates the plain meaning of the language in which this is reported. Much as the priest exhorts K. to show “respect for the text” (*Trial* 217), Kafka’s writings tend to insist on the literal, the public, the everyday meaning of words: “The power of their language,” says Sontag, “derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare” (29). It is through this dogged, even excessive literalness that Kafka most effectively turns the ordinary meanings of words inside out, so that they become extraordinary; this is his often-noted technique of concretizing dead metaphors, reversing the very process of “figuration” by which, to return to the parable from *The Trial*, we allow ourselves to think of an abstraction like “the Law” as occupying a place, such that we can be summoned to “appear before” it (Koelb 11-13; Derrida, “Before the Law” 188). Kafka does not follow the trajectory of other anarcho-modernists, such as his countryman, Kupka, towards increasing “anti-representationalist” abstraction and hermeticism (Leighen, “White Peril”; “*Réveil anarchiste*” 27, 26n34). Why?

Perhaps we could see Kafka as taking a middle way between two of the imperatives posed by his book of Kropotkin’s collected writings, *Words of a Rebel*. The first imperative is to resist and oppose the falsehoods of majoritarianism—the privileging of a passive collectivity over the complete freedom of the individual—and its supposed realization in representative government, which inevitably entails the transfer of power away from the represented:

Representative government had as its aim to put an end to personal government .... Yet it has always shown the tendency to revert to personal government and to submit itself to a single man ... What, in fact, is asked of voters? To find a man to whom they can confide the right to legislate on everything.... (Kropotkin 71, 127, 132)

No individual can represent the collectivity—and, vice versa, no anonymous collectivity can substitute itself for the uniqueness of the individuals and minority groupings who comprise it; as was declared by the editors of the anarchist journal *Volný Duch* (‘Free Spirit,’ 1894-1896), “The custom of allowing oneself to be represented, the recognition of authority, must necessarily hinder the individual



principle" (qtd. in Tomek 19). That is to say: don't trust anybody to legislate for you; that delegation of power, that free mandate, creates a representative who need represent only himself—a floating signifier, free of reference. To borrow the words of a Czech anarchist motto: "nevěřte nikomu, nevěřte ani nám!" 'don't trust anybody, not even us!' (Slačálek).<sup>7</sup>

The other imperative we find in *Words of a Rebel* is Kropotkin's call to the artist to shun the egotism of art for art's sake and "put your pen, your brush, your chisel at the service of the revolution":

Retell, in your prose rich with images or on your gripping canvases, the titanic struggles of the peoples against their oppressors. . . . Show the people what is ugly in present-day life, and put your finger on the causes of that ugliness; tell us what a rational life might be if it did not have to stumble at every pace because of the ineptitude and the ignominies of the present social order. (58)

It is tempting to gloss these two imperatives as do not represent!—the imperative of anti-statism—and you must represent!—the imperative of social realism. However, on closer inspection, they are more complicated than that. When Kropotkin asks for art to depict present-day life, he also asks for it to "tell us what a rational life might be" (58). This utopian moment within Kropotkin's variety of social realism—what was, in fact, called *l'art social* by the anarchists of the fin-de-siècle—consists in a certain departure from the actual in favor of the might be, the possible.<sup>8</sup> As Daniel Colson writes, "the emancipatory project of anarchism consists in its opposition to every mutilation of possibilities" (*Trois Essais* 16, my trans). Thus, the politicized art Kropotkin calls for cannot merely reproduce what is ugly in present-day life in the manner of Zola's Naturalism, which is incapable of pointing to any possibility beyond the present misery. Indeed, in the same essay, Kropotkin condemns the Naturalist aesthetic which, "lacking a revolutionary ideal," substitutes for it the "realism [which] represent[s] meticulously, in prose or verse, the suffocating mud of a sewer" (53-54).

On the face of it, Kropotkin's demands, the demands of *l'art social*, might seem impossible to satisfy. What form of representation both shows the actual, unflinchingly cataloguing the ugliness concealed behind idealizing discourses, and at the same time refuses and transcends that ugliness in favor of the ideal? What art could

ask us, at one and the same time, to trust in its representations and not to trust any representation at all? For it seems that in Kropotkin's phrasing, what anarchism calls for is not simply a resistance to narrative or a rejection of representation, whether in the form of pure art or even of anti-art: it calls for a kind of representational art which must constantly fight off the reifying tendencies of representation—namely, the illusions of sameness and false concreteness, the surreptitious subtraction of change and potentiality from the real.

Kafka, too, is a representational artist—a representative man, as Frederick Karl has it—who is at war with these tendencies in representation. Valerie Greenberg points to the way that Kafka's style is defined by a peculiar use of qualifiers (such as *allerdings* 'however,' 'though,' 'on the other hand') in combination with the subjunctive to deny us any real certainty about what information can be trusted. Some of what the stories report, Greenberg argues, is represented as reliable by the narrative voice; however, this reliable content is usually represented as "contrary to fact" (95-96, 98). If this is a form of narrative representation, it is a strange one, since it constantly reminds us that the words of the text re-present or make present again what never was present and may never be so. Moreover, by privileging the possible over the actual, Kafka's writings tend to surreptitiously de-presentify what is present: the concrete, mundane, everyday world, seen this way, starts to look more and more spectral, unreal, fantastic. "All is imaginary [*Phantasie*]," Kafka writes in his diary: "family, office, friends, the street, all imaginary, [whether] far away or close at hand ... the truth that lies closest, however, is only this: that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell" (*Diaries 1914-1923* 197).

This apprehension of even what is close at hand as somehow intangible, imaginary, marks both Kafka's answer to the challenge of Kropotkin's critique of representation and, at the same time, his departure from Kropotkin's conception of *l'art social* as a kind of realism that could express utopian longings. Kafka's writing, on its face, is dystopian, not utopian. How is this to be explained? Michael Löwy suggests that Kafka's excoriation of the fallen state in which we live constitutes a kind of *utopia negativa*, a 'negative anarchism,' as if by showing us the Penal Colony we inhabit, Kafka might provoke us

to reject and abandon it, as does the traveler in the story; however, this relentless negativity leaves it open to the conclusion drawn by Kropotkin's biographer, George Woodcock, that Kafka's writing is so wedded to horror and despair that it effectively makes it impossible for us "to see any alternative to authority" (Löwy, *Redemption* 81; Kafka, *Metamorphosis* 226-27; Woodcock 183-84).

Certainly there is something to Woodcock's charge. The truth, for Kafka, is that we are locked in a perfect prison, "a windowless and doorless cell" (197). However—*alldings!*—note that this carceral arrangement, in its very perfection, is both pointless and impossible. It is impossible, because being without entry or exit, it can no more admit a prisoner than it can release one; it is pointless, because carcerality depends on the concept of discipline, and a cell that cannot admit or release a prisoner is incapable of imposing any discipline whatsoever. In conventional logic, the category of the actual excludes the impossible and subsumes the possible; for Kafka, our actual world, the truth of the carceral society, is an impossibility, an absurdity. To read this representation of the truth is to be unable to rationally accept it as possible. Only the counterfactual, the unavailable might-be, would constitute a rational life.

It is only when we connect the insights of textualist interpretations of Kafka such as Greenberg's with Kafka's political context that we can begin to properly understand the role played by the dominant trope of his fiction: "the Law." Many commentators, noting the distinction between the Law (singular) and the laws (plural) in Kafka's fiction, have suggested interpretations which make sense of the mysterious quality of the former in comparison with the latter (Ziolkowski 234-35). This irreducible singular, the Law, is "not generally known," Kafka's narrator explains, and may not "exist at all"; nothing is capable of representing it, and it is inaccessible (Kafka, *Complete Stories* 437; *In the Penal Colony* 148). What sense can be made of such an absurdity—an "unknown system of jurisprudence" (*Trial*, 61)?<sup>9</sup>

Several explanations have been proposed. Theological interpreters of Kafka tend to see it as a figure for the divine, the Absolute (Brod 174-75).<sup>10</sup> For these readers, Kafka's writings constitute a modern Kabbalah with a hermetic mystery at its core. On the other hand, Kafka's secularist interpreters, noting the repugnant

and totalitarian character of the Law in Kafka, suggest that it represents something which is to be rejected; Theodore Ziolkowski, for instance, sees it as standing for “the antiquated laws of the Habsburg monarchy,” irrationally preoccupied with personal guilt. For Ziolkowski, in this reading, Kafka’s *The Trial* is a contest “between the conservative values of the past and the progressive forces of modern society” (234-35).<sup>11</sup> I would argue neither that the Law is a figure for an irrational sublime to which we must abject ourselves, nor that the laws are a figure for a progressive modernity which is to be championed. Instead, I would suggest that Kafka is showing us how our apparently intelligible, rational laws depend on and refer to an unintelligible and irrational Law.

Ordinarily, *Gesetze*, ‘laws,’ are written and public documents meant to govern behavior, action-governing texts (things that have been *gesetzt*, ‘set down,’ in writing): they must be so, for the rewards or punishments they specify must be known to all relevant parties in order for them to be effective, to elicit compliance, to acquire perlocutionary force. The laws are supposed to determine what shall be done to individuals who engage in some behavior (or fail to engage in that behavior): when I do what a specific law commands or forbids, I am to receive a specific reward or punishment. Life governed by laws is an alienated form of life in which justice is constantly identified with something external to action (the extrinsic reward or punishment), as if nothing contained its own justification within itself; hence, as George Benello remarks, the world of laws and legality is fundamentally “based on coercion and ... bribery” (79).<sup>12</sup> The trouble with laws as behavior-governing signs, however, is that their meanings are always underdetermined: they must be interpreted in order to mean anything, and this task inevitably falls to special classes of individual officially invested with the authority to interpret the law. In effect, as the narrator of Kafka’s story, “The Problem of Our Laws,” remarks, “The Law is whatever the nobles do,” i.e., whatever the authorities entrusted to execute the laws do (*Complete Stories* 437). Indeed, this remark captures the essence of an anarchist critique of authority as

a way to secure compliance with a directive, distinguished by the ground on which the directive is obeyed. You exercise authority over my conduct if you issue me a directive, and I follow it be-

cause I believe that something about you, not the directive, makes compliance the proper course. (Ritter 66)

This is precisely what Kafka identifies, in his famous 1919 letter to his father, as "the enigmatic quality [*das Rätselhafte*] that all tyrants have whose rights are based on their person and not on reason" (*Dearest Father* 145). Laws require authorities to interpret them, and interpretive authorities produce not reasons but *Rätseln*, 'riddles.'

The only recourse we have against such a cynical conclusion is the appeal beyond the written letter of the laws and its human interpreters to the unwritten spirit of the laws. This spirit of the laws—Gustav Landauer would have called it a spook or phantom—is taken to be at once the ground of the codified, written law, and at the same time, above the limitations of written discourse; it is supposed to be both the center of the system of textual meanings and radically outside the system, just as God is supposed to be the ground of the visible world and at the same time beyond it (Lunn 225; Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 279). Law is always utopian, in the (derogatory) root sense of the word (*ou-topos*, 'no-place'). This utopian moment, this irrational or fantastic element, is what Kafka calls the Law—an all powerful principle, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, which is at the same time totally unavailable to us.

Herein lies the logic of Kafka's critique of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy, according to Max Weber, is the rational form of organization in which authority is transferred from charismatic persons to impersonal laws; it is designed to protect us from the irrational caprice of the charismatic ruler endowed with authority, just as representative government, the modern political form par excellence, was "to put an end to personal government," as Kropotkin has it (Weber 328-30). Kafka unmasks these arrangements as a pretense, or perhaps as a farce: just as parliamentary representation reverts to personal government, so the pretense of the rational organization to be ruled by its own laws reveals itself to be a mystification—indeed, a utopia, an imaginary perfect world (Kropotkin 127). In this utopia, no person rules, only the laws are obeyed; democratic polities voluntarily obey a government of laws, not men. In reality, as Michel Foucault argues, it is just because the laws are impersonal that they can be bent to any purpose by the persons who are charged with administering them (151).<sup>13</sup> The bureaucrat, like Kafka's doorkeeper,

stands with the laws behind him, but these laws themselves refer to a nothingness. Thus, in “The Refusal,” when petitioners from the village come to visit the administrator who governs their lives,

he stands there like the wall of the world. Behind him is nothingness, one imagines hearing voices in the background, but this is probably a delusion; after all, he represents the end of all things, at least for us. (*Complete Stories* 264)

The bureaucratic administrator is surrounded by an aura of unquestionable authority—that charisma, banished as irrational, which has returned as rationalized irrationality. The Law which gives him legitimacy is always absent, its imagined presence merely a delusion. The bureaucratic world is the home of delusions, of imaginary presences, spooks and phantoms. So Kafka writes to Milena Jesenská that the bureaucratic office, seemingly the realm of the mundane par excellence, is actually the domain of the fantastic (*Letters to Milena* 126).

This fantastic quality is a bad omen for the project of which the office is a product—the project of *Aufklärung*, Enlightenment, the disenchantment of the world. In an enlightened world, superstitious fantasy would be dispensed of in favor of knowledge: “The Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear,” write Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (3). In the disenchanted modern world, however, it seems that the grotesque, the bizarre, the fantastic tends to irrupt all the more fiercely in the very midst of the rational order of things—and with it, irrational mystery and fear.

In this way, Kafka does not do what Kropotkin and Woodcock ask—namely, discover the utopian potentiality hidden within the concrete structures of actual society—but inverts and undoes the distinctions between the fantastic and the concrete, the possible and the actual, even utopia and dystopia. The Kafkaan dystopia, the place of negativity, is always already a utopia, a no-place—not potentially but actually, as Walter Benjamin recognized when he wrote that “to speak of any order or hierarchy is impossible here” (117). In the process of stripping away what is apparently mere surface (the material in which Law typically manifests itself, i.e., legal writings and the process of reading and enforcing them), bringing forth the pure substance (the idea of Law in its naked absoluteness), the thing is robbed of its utility, becomes end-less—meaning infinite, but also

without an end, i.e., goalless, pointless. Kafka's carceral world is always already anarchy, the no-place without laws, precisely because it is the place where the Law has become everything and nothing.<sup>14</sup>

In order to undermine the representational systems on which law and authority depend, Kafka calls on the powers of representation, narrative power. He creates narratives which turn the rationality of conventional realism against itself to rediscover mythic terror; narratives which reveal, behind the seeming transparency of representational language, a baffling opacity; which reveal, behind the seeming sense of words, a senselessness or silence. His work constitutes, in the words of Caroline Granier, "a realism which denounces itself as an illusion" (my trans.). At the same time, however, he does not follow the path of the anti-representational modernisms that would hail silence or incomprehensibility as that which breaks with the Law, as an escape from the text into a radical outside (Moore 121). Instead, he reminds us that silence has always been the foundation of authority, the irrational kernel within Law's rationality, that, as Derrida has it, "the *praise [éloge]* of silence always takes place within *logos*," the structure of representation (*Writing and Difference* 37; *Of Grammatology* 163). The freedom Kafka pursues does not appear to consist in a rejection of representation per se but in the construction of alternative forms of representation, both literary and political, that never allow power to place itself outside of the realm of dialogue, to disguise itself as the Absolute.<sup>15</sup>

These de-absolutized signs, these anarchist representations, would have to constantly remind us of their contingency, their makeshift nature, their merely relative adequacy relative to changing human needs—that "human nature, essentially changeable, [which] can endure no restraint" (*Complete Stories* 239). They would not promise utopia in the form of a transparent, manageable universe of immobile referents; they would not provide consolation ("the literature written by the anarchists," as Granier puts it, "is not a comfortable literature" [my trans.]). In effect, these words would have to constantly whisper, "Don't deceive yourself; don't trust anybody to represent you, not even us." This, perhaps, is the disquieting voice we hear in the background of Kafka's fictions.

Notes

1 Here and elsewhere, I cite Breon Mitchell's translation. The Muir translation, taking more liberties with Kafka's German, more poetically suggests "a mode of living completely outside the jurisdiction of the Court" (266).

2 All German quotations from Kafka taken from *The Kafka Project*, ed. Mauro Nervi (<http://www.kafka.org>).

3 If Kafka wrote his stories exclusively in German, Klaus Wagenbach reminds us, he was not linguistically confined to the community of German speakers in Prague, but "spoke and wrote good Czech"—indeed, he was "one of the few" writers in German who did (13).

4 Another one of the "founders of the Czech anarchist movement," Michal Kácha, who told Brod of meeting Kafka through the Klub Mladých, also collaborated with Neumann as an editor of the avant-garde journal *Červený Řeč*, published between 1918-1921, which Kafka also read (Löwy, "Franz Kafka and Libertarian Socialism" 120; Born et al. 200).

5 See, for example, Michael Löwy's "Franz Kafka and Libertarian Socialism."

6 Willy Prochazka also vehemently disputes the likelihood of Kafka's involvement with the Klub Mladých (275-87).

7 Note that while anarchism, like any social order, presupposes (and attempts to build) a considerable fund of trust between individuals, this trust is to be established through reciprocal and egalitarian relations, always revocable, never to be allocated to anyone merely by virtue of a position (Colson, *Petit lexique* 63, my trans.). Indeed, the fixation and routinization of the relationship of trust that is otherwise essential to any community is the step by which the community gives rise to a power that, while in reality springing from every point, appears to be located radically outside of itself. Here, one is reminded of Kafka's description of the Castle which, while seemingly inaccessible, the ultimate "center elsewhere" (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 279, original emphasis) is nonetheless, on closer inspection, nothing more than "a rather miserable little town, pieced together from village houses" (Kafka, *The Castle* 8). As Löwy points out, this paradoxical identity of the Castle with the "town, [of its] power" with the "submission [of] the whole population," directly parallels the anarchist insight into the nature of political power ("Paper Chains" 50, 52-53), an insight most forcefully stated by Gustav Landauer in an essay of 1910: "we are the state—and are it as long as we are not otherwise, as long as we have not created the institutions that constitute a genuine community and society of human beings" (165, my emphasis).

8 Parisian anarchists' theorizations of *l'art social* found a relatively rapid echo



in Prague, where Arnošt Procházka commented on them in his *Moderní revue pro literaturu*.

9 That an unknown law is absurd, while intuitive—"How can citizens conform to orders," asks Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, "if they are not notified of what the orders are ...?" (*General Idea* 132)—asks for some thought. There have indeed been secret laws, which rank among the typical devices of totalitarian regimes. Moreover, as Proudhon observed, the very bureaucratic character of the juridical apparatus produces more laws than any citizen can rationally be expected to know, rendering most of them *de facto* if not *de jure* unknown (*General Idea* 132). However, it is a commonplace of the juridical tradition that a basic requirement for the rule of law that Kafka remarks on at the beginning of *The Trial* ("K. lived in a state governed by law ... all statutes were in force" [6]) is publicity, i.e., the condition that the laws must be "explicit [and] transparent" to ordinary citizens (*Trial* 6; Fuller 670).

10 Brod shows himself altogether incapable of understanding the anarchism of a Michal Mareš when he blithely equates the Court and the Castle with divine "justice and grace" (qtd. in Vašata 136); it is Edwin Muir, however, who is perhaps the worst offender in his insistence that for Kafka, "it is man's duty to direct his life in accordance with this law whose workings he cannot understand" (56). How can Kafka's best friend and his most prominent translator both miss the point so badly? K. can never enter the Castle; no one can direct his or her life in accordance with an unknowable Law, and this impossibility ought to function as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Milan Kundera is far more clear-eyed when he diagnoses the theological overtones of Kafka's fiction as in fact "*pseudotheological*"—the same aura, I would add, that clings to every totalitarian apparatus (102, original emphasis). In tracing an arc up from the all-too-earthly to the pseudotheological, Kafka also allows us to see down into the root meaning of the word hierarchy, its foundation in the sense of the mystery of rule and command, the *hieros* 'sacred,' 'holy' *arche* 'principle,' 'power,' 'source.'

11 Or, more facily, the world of the Court and the Castle is identified with a totalitarian experience that can then be comfortably contrasted with our democratic lives (in which, as we all know, nobody is arrested in an extrajudicial manner, forbidden to know what crimes they are charged with, and so forth). Kundera objects to this reading that "in Kafka's novels, there is neither the party nor ideology with its jargon nor politics, the police, or the army," and that therefore they do not "correspond to a definition of totalitarianism" (106). This is not completely true—for instance, the army is prominently featured in "The Conscription of Troops," "The Imperial Colonel," "In the Penal Colony," "The Refusal," "An Old Manuscript," etc. Why does Kundera elide the analogy? He wants to read Kafka existentially rather than historically, to avoid reducing his novels to political allegories: "the *Kafkan* represents one fundamental pos-

sibility of man and his world, a possibility that is not historically determined and that accompanies man more or less eternally” (105, original emphasis). While I appreciate Kundera’s attempt to shut down easy explanations of Kafka’s work here, I would insist that Kafka’s works are political because they describe a world of domination, a political phenomenon. His writings are not merely exaggerated descriptions of totalitarian relations, but hyper-exaggerated descriptions of those relations which have the effect of revealing the essences of those relations, separating them from the historically-determined accidents of their specific modern manifestations (party, ideology, etc.) in much the same way that a chemist centrifuges a colloid to separate out its constituent parts and examine the heaviest sediments apart from the albumen. At the same time, these sediments are most emphatically not ahistorical, even if they are indeed possibilities inherent in the human condition; what Kafka reveals as the essence of the State as an organizational form is coercive power or domination. He reveals these as the rationalized faces of ancient mystery. This is the so-called theological dimension of Kafka: his discovery of (to invert Marx’s phrase) the mystical kernel within the rational shell of the modern world (Marx 103).

12 Contrast this with the world of *The Trial*, in which favorable and unfavorable verdicts, for all intents and purposes, are dispensed at random, in which, to paraphrase the character Titorelli, no one can have “the slightest influence” on one’s fate (152).

13 See also Larry L. Tift and Dennis Sullivan, *The Struggle to be Human: Crime, Criminology, and Anarchism* (58-59), on the discretion of both judges and police officers to interpret the Law.

14 It is a lawless place in the way that Orwell’s totalitarian dystopia is lawless: “In Oceania there is no law” (211). Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the relationship between totalitarian violence, silence, and laws is pertinent here as well: “Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws—*les lois se taisent*, as the French Revolution phrased it—but everything and everybody must fall silent” (18, original emphasis). Again, the ironic closeness between utopia and dystopia is essential to the Kafkan universe: if the economic principle of Kropotkin’s anti-authoritarian communism is that money cannot and must not be asked to represent the value of anyone’s life and labor—the absolute repudiation of the distributive principle governing Kafka’s hated job at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute—the principle of the world of *The Trial*, once again, is that there is nothing you can do to secure rewards and avoid punishments, no rule you can observe, no command you can obey, to save yourself: “whatever you do,” as Kropotkin paraphrases the maxim of the military reprisals of 1871, “you will perish ... You are ... outside the law” (Kropotkin 100-01, 93-94).

15 Cf. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's definitively anarchist declaration of his intention "to eliminate the ABSOLUTE" (*De la Justice* 3.249, my trans.).

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Herder, 1972. Print.
- Anderson, Mark M. *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992. Print.
- Antliff, Allan. *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. Print.
- Benello, George C. *From The Ground Up: Essays on Grassroots and Workplace Democracy*. Boston: South End, 1992. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1977. Print.
- Born, Jürgen et al. *Kafkas Bibliothek: ein beschreibendes Verzeichnis: mit einem Index aller in Kafkas Schriften erwähnten Bücher, Zeitschriften und Zeitschriftenbeiträge*. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990. Print.
- Brod, Max. *Franz Kafka: A Biography*. New York: Schocken, 1963. Print.
- Burns, Wayne. "Variations on a Theme by Octave Mirbeau." *Accent* 17.2 (Winter 1957): 45-51. Print.
- Colson, Daniel. *Petit lexique philosophique de l'anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2001. Print.
- . *Trois Essais de Philosophie Anarchiste: Islam, Histoire, Monadologie*. Paris: Léo Scheer, 2004. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Before the Law." Trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston. *Acts of Literature*. Ed. Derek Attridge. New York: Routledge, 1992. 181-220. Print.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974. Print.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978. Print.
- Dodd, W. J. *Kafka and Dostoyevsky: The Shaping of Influence*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992. Print.
- Eisenzweig, Uri. "Représentations illégitimes: Dreyfus, ou la fin de l'anarchis-

- me." *Romantisme* 87 (1995): 76-85. Print.
- Emrich, Wilhelm. *Franz Kafka: A Critical Study of His Writings*. Trans. Sheema Zeben Buehne. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980. Print.
- Fuller, Lon L. "Positivism and Fidelity to Law: a Reply to Professor Hart." *Harvard Law Review* 71.4 (1958): 630-72. Print.
- Granier, Caroline. "Nous sommes des briseurs des formules": Les écrivains anarchistes en France à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. RA-Forum. 4 Apr. 2007. Web. 10 Apr. 2007. <<http://raforum.info/these/spip.php?rubrique17>>.
- Greenberg, Valerie D. *Transgressive Readings: The Texts of Franz Kafka and Max Planck*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990. Print.
- Halperin, Joan U. *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete & Anarchist in Fin-De-Siècle Paris*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988. Print.
- Hayman, Ronald. *K: A Biography of Kafka*. London: Phoenix, 2001. Print.
- Institut für Textkritik. "Der Jude. Eine Monatsschrift 2 (1917/1918) Inhaltsverzeichnis." Institut für Textkritik, Heidelberg. 5 Jan. 2005. Web. 10 May 2007. <[http://www.textkritik.de/der\\_jude/der\\_jude\\_1917\\_1918.htm](http://www.textkritik.de/der_jude/der_jude_1917_1918.htm)>.
- Jamison, Anne. "Kmen: A Faraway Magazine about Which We Know Nothing." *Comparative Literature Studies* 44.1-2 (2007): 51-66. Print.
- Janouch, Gustav. *Conversations With Kafka*. Trans. Goronwy Rees. New York: New Directions, 1971. Print.
- Kadlec, David. *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Castle*. Trans. Mark Harman. New York: Schocken, 1998. Print.
- . *The Complete Stories*. Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1971. Print.
- . *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*. Trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins. New York: Schocken, 1954. Print.
- . *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-1913*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Joseph Kresh. New York: Schocken, 1947. Print.
- . *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914-1923*. Ed. Max Brod. Trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1949. Print.

- . *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*. Trans. Richard & Clara Winston. New York: Schocken, 1977. Print.
- . *Letters to Milena*. Trans. Philip Boehm. New York: Schocken, 1990. Print.
- . *The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Schocken, 1988. Print.
- . *The Trial*. Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir. New York: Vintage, 1964. Print.
- . *The Trial*. Trans. Breon Mitchell. New York: Schocken, 1998. Print.
- Karl, Frederick R. *Franz Kafka: Representative Man*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991. Print.
- Koelb, Clayton. *Kafka's Rhetoric: The Passion of Reading*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.
- Kropotkin, Peter. *Words of a Rebel*. Trans. George Woodcock. Montréal: Black Rose, 1992. Print.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. Trans. Linda Asher. New York: Perennial Classics, 2000. Print.
- Landauer, Gustav. "Weak Statesmen, Weaker People." Trans. Robert Ludlow. *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, vol. 1: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300 CE to 1939)*. Ed. Robert Graham. Montréal: Black Rose, 2005. 164-65. Print.
- Lighten, Patricia. "The White Peril and L'Art Nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism." *Art Bulletin* 72.4 (December 1990): 609-30. Print.
- . "Réveil anarchiste: Salon Painting, Political Satire, Modernist Art." *Modernism/Modernity* 2.2 (1995) 17-47. Print.
- Löwy, Michael. "Franz Kafka and Libertarian Socialism." *New Politics* 6.3 (Summer 1997): 120-74. Print.
- . "Paper Chains: Bureaucratic Despotism and Voluntary Servitude in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*." *Diogenes* 51.4 (2004): 49-58. Print.
- . *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*. Trans. Hope Heaney. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992. Print.
- Lunn, Eugene D. *Prophet of Community: The Romantic Socialism of Gustav Landauer*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. Print.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990. Print.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "(In)Felicitous Speech Acts in Kafka's *The Trial*." *Tympanum*

4. 15 July 2000. Web. 10 Oct. 2004. <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/miller.html>>.
- Moore, John. "Composition and Decomposition: Contemporary Anarchist Aesthetics." *Anarchist Studies* 6 (1998): 113-22. Print.
- Muir, Edwin. "Franz Kafka." *A Franz Kafka Miscellany: Pre-fascist Exile*. Ed. Harry Slochower. Trans. G. Humphreys-Roberts and Sophie Probaum. New York: Twice a Year, 1946. 55-66. Print.
- Nový, Lubomir, et al., eds. "Philosophical Themes in Czech Fiction." *Czech Philosophy In The XXth Century*. Washington, D.C.: Paideia & The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994. Print.
- Orwell, George. 1984. New York: Signet Classics, 2004. Print.
- Pan, David. "Kafka as a Populist: Re-reading 'In the Penal Colony.'" *Telos* 101 (Fall 1994): 3-40. Print.
- Pawel, Ernst. *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*. New York: Farrar, 1984. Print.
- Pfemfert, Franz, ed. *Die Aktions-Lyrik: Nummern 1-7, 1916-1922*. Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1973. Print.
- Porter, Laurence M. *The Crisis of French Symbolism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990. Print.
- Procházka, Arnošt. "Socialná Literatura." *Moderní revue pro literaturu, umění a život* 5 (1897): 64. Print.
- Prochazka, Willy. "Kafka's Association with Jaroslav Hašek and the Czech Anarchists." *Modern Austrian Literature* 11 (1978): 275-87. Print.
- Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *De la Justice dans l'Église et dans la Révolution*. Paris: Rivière, 1930. Print.
- . *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. John Beverley Robinson. Freedom: London, 1923. Print.
- Redner, Harry. *A New Science of Representation: Towards an Integrated Theory of Representation in Science, Politics and Art*. Boulder: Westview, 1994. Print.
- Resina, Joan Ramon. "Form as Event: The Case of the Catalan Avant-Garde." *La Torre: Revista General de la Universidad de Puerto Rico* 2.4-5 (Apr.-Sept. 1997): 355-90. Print.
- Ritter, Alan. *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980. Print.
- Robertson, Ritchie. *Kafka, Judaism, Politics, and Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon,

1985. Print.

Slačálek, Ondřej. "'Don't Trust Anybody, Not Even Us!' A Brief History of Czech Anarchism." Trans. Petra Horska. Československá anarchistická federácia. 24 Dec. 2002. Web. 2 Jan. 2004. <<http://csaf.cz/english.php?file=56>>.

Sontag, Susan. *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, 1969. Print.

Tiftt, Larry L., and Dennis Sullivan. *The Struggle to be Human: Crime, Criminology, and Anarchism*. Orkney: Cienfuegos, 1980. Print.

Tomek, Václav. "Freedom And Its Fate Among Czech Radicals." *Traditions And Present Problems Of Czech Political Culture*. Ed. Miloslav Bedná and Michal Vejraka. Bucharest: Paideia and the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994. 11-45. Print.

Urzidil, Johannes. *There Goes Kafka*. Trans. Harold L. Basilius. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1968. Print.

Vašata, Rudolf. "'Amerika' and Charles Dickens." *The Kafka Problem*. Ed. Angel Flores. New York: New Directions, 1946. 134-39. Print.

Wagenbach, Klaus. *Kafka*. Trans. Ewald Osers. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003. Print.

Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Ed. Talcott Parsons. New York: Oxford UP, 1968. Print.

Woodcock, George. *The Writer and Politics*. London: Porcupine, 1948. Print.

Ziolkowski, Theodore. *The Mirror of Justice: Literary Reflections of Legal Crises*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. Print.