Tradition and Betrayal in "Das Urteil"

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FEW WORKS AS BRIEF AND COMPACT as "Das Urteil" (The Judgment) loom so large in the landscape of literary history. This short story of deceptive simplicity but replete with unresolved questions represented a breakthrough for Kafka and became a magnet for critical readers, who were drawn to its simultaneous sparseness and intensity. Kafka himself reports how he wrote out the full text in one exhausting sitting in the night of 22–23 September 1912, marking a definitive separation between his early literary attempts and his mature accomplishments: "Die Verwandlung" (The Metamorphosis) followed in November and December, even as he made extensive progress on the novel fragment that Max Brod would later dub *Amerika* (Binder 123–25). There can be no doubt that the completion of "Das Urteil" brought Kafka's creative productivity to a new level, ushering in the series of works that has become central to modernist world literature. We know that Kafka wished to have Brod destroy much of his writing; "Das Urteil" was not on the list. On the contrary, it is one of the few texts that Kafka continued to regard with satisfaction (Stern 114). Indeed it occupies a special place as a key to Kafka's major achievement and to a much broader definition of literary sensibility in the twentieth century (Sokel 34). "Das Urteil" represents a breakthrough, redefining the literary tradition of the canon; and it is a redefinition that unfolds precisely through the logic of the text.

Why this sudden outburst of creativity and why did it take the form of "Das Urteil"? There is of course a biographical context, and much criticism has dwelled on it, endeavoring to explain the troublesome narrative with reference to data from Kafka's life. His meeting with Felice Bauer, who would become his fiancée, took place in August 1912. It is to her that he dedicated the story, she figures clearly as the model for Georg's fiancée, Frieda Brandenfeld (whose initials she shares), and in his correspondence with Felice, he refers to "Das Urteil" as her story. The prospect of marriage raised questions for Kafka regarding his own commitment to the life of a writer and the renunciation of bourgeois security, while both the conventionalism of marriage and the unconventional prospects of a

literary career represented potential provocations to the troubled relationship between Kafka and his father. Hence the plausibility of referencing the prominent themes of the narrative — the father-son conflict, the relationship to the distant friend, and the imminent marriage — to Kafka's own biographical situation. Indeed critics have proposed explaining "Das Urteil," especially the altercation between Georg and his father, by mustering Kafka's letter to his father of 1919 as evidence of the strained family ties (Binder 132; Neumann 217).

Attempts to resolve the complexities of the story by drawing attention to possible literary sources are not fundamentally dissimilar to biographical connections: both attempt to explain — which is not to say, "explain away" — the phenomenon of the literary work through objective external data. In this manner, "Das Urteil" has been connected to a fairy tale from Prague, to aspects of Dostoevsky (especially *Crime and Punishment*), and to Brod's novel *Arnold Beer* (Binder 126–31). In no case is the evidence as compelling as in the estimation of the importance of Kafka's experience of Yiddish theater, which he frequently attended in the period prior to writing "Das Urteil." The family constellations, the use of unrealistic gestures, and the peripatetic reversal of fortunes all can be seen as derived from the performances that we know Kafka attended (Binder 132–34; Beck). A further, related potential source is the liturgy for the Jewish Day of Atonement, the Yom Kippur holiday, which in 1912 fell on 21–22 September, that is, the day before the night in which Kafka wrote the text. We know that he attended the synagogue that year, so the associated liturgical tropes were presumably on his mind, including most importantly the imminence of a divine judgment about to be rendered, pending atonement.

As important as these biographical and intertextual references may be in illuminating single aspects of the text, they necessarily fall short of a penetrating account of the work itself. Kafka's personal relationship to his fiancée or to his father, or for that matter, his reading habits or religious belief are ultimately private matters. Interpretations of the story that tie it too firmly to such personal information fail to account for the fascination that this text in particular has exercised on both professional critics and the larger reading public. Thus Ronald Gray comments:

> Has Kafka done more than cater for himself; is there anything here for the reader, in so far as he is a "common reader," someone who reads for pleasure and enlightenment rather than research? The quantity of biographical information needed for understanding the story suggests that it is essentially esoteric, that it has value for its position in Kafka's work, as a gateway, rather than as an accomplished achievement in itself. (72)

Treating the text as an expression of primarily private matters in effect suggests that the text has little merit as literature on its own, that Kafka's own estimation of the text was wrong, and that it should only be read symptomatically or at best merely as a study toward the mature work, beginning with "Die Verwandlung." This approach, ultimately, leaves Georg alone in the private room where the story commences: Kafka's personal vehicle, perhaps, toward a career as a writer, but not a significant imaginative accomplishment on its own terms. We should not underestimate the attraction of such a critical strategy, for it minimizes the challenge that the text poses to the reader, who must grapple with its perplexing account of human relationships: the paralogical character of the dispute between father and son, the undecided standing of the friend, the glaring discrepancy between everything we know about Georg and the severity of the verdict, and, perhaps most of all, the unquestioned obedience with which the capital sentence is carried out.

Yet we should also be very wary of adopting the underlying assumption that these apparently irresolvable tensions within "Das Urteil" undercut its literary standing. On the contrary, it is precisely this nearly impenetrable network, layer upon layer of distinct meanings, that makes up the substance of the achievement. "Das Urteil" became a breakthrough for Kafka's own career, just as it represents a crucial elaboration of his thinking on justice and guilt, the grand theme of his later writing. Moreover the very intricacy and seemingly problematic nature of the text set a new standard for the possibilities of literary writing, redefining the nature of literary achievement and therefore of literary judgment and canonicity. The topic of the text is a judgment passed on the son — and we will see how perplexing the possibility of that judgment turns out to be — but it is even more a judgment on literature, its institutionalization, and its potential. "Das Urteil" calls for a rejudgment of literary life.

The fascination of "Das Urteil" derives initially from the breathtaking discrepancy between the commencement of the story and its conclusion, a fall from complacent security to suicide, magnified by the brevity and rapid pace of the narration. All seems right in the world of Georg Bendemann, until suddenly, and without a fully compelling explanation, all seems wrong, and this reversal draws the reader into an infinite loop of rethinking, the unceasing search for the explanation of the verdict and its execution. Yet on closer examination neither the initial stability nor the concluding leap simply carries a single, fixed meaning, for the narrative is more complex than it first appears. It is of course true that the narrative commences with a seemingly familiar and conventional rhetoric of literary realism, introducing a standard figure, a young businessman, who is

moreover the carrier of an unproblematic and firmly centered perspective. We find him in his own private room, seated at his desk, or more precisely, a "Schreibtisch" (writing table, *L* 39, *CS* 77) where he has just concluded a letter; meanwhile he can gaze out the window, surveying a bridge, a river, and the hills beyond. This sort of hero, and the associated epistemological integration of private and public knowledge — the personal letter and the external view — had constituted the standard requisites of poetic realism in Germany at least since 1848, with their harmonious balance of subjective and objective components (Hohendahl 376–419). Indeed long before 1912, the structures of realistic writing had been appropriated by a commercialized entertainment literature and to this day, and not only in Germany, they remain the standard fare of popular fiction. Yet Kafka flaunts the signs of realism at the outset of "Das Urteil" in a way that overstates them and thereby undermines them. The announced temporality, a Sunday morning in the height of spring, conveys a fairy tale atmosphere compounded by the "It was" with which the text begins. The generic tension between the tropes of realism and the markers of the fairy tale should set the reader on guard. Georg's smug confidence at his desk is not fully warranted, for, in broader terms, the epistemological closure promised by conventional realism, particularly in its commercial and popularized variation, is about to be called into question through a redefinition of expectations for literary authenticity.

Literary realism, strictly speaking, was about the prominence of sensuous details, the realia of life, in the literary text, and their arrangement in a presumably reasonable order. It is therefore noteworthy, as John Ellis has pointed out, that the descriptions in the first paragraph are slightly out of focus. Georg is in one of a row of houses, characterized as distinguishable only in terms of their color and height: yet surely color and height, the importance of which is casually minimized by the narrator, are precisely the most prominent sorts of qualities that realism might address. In addition, the qualification of the green of the landscape across the river as "schwach" (weak) is an odd usage in German, where an alternative adverb might have been chosen (Ellis 76–77). The very substance of the realist project of objective description seems to be breaking down, and this is corroborated by the role that Georg plays as the presumed agent of the observational perspective. He would seem to be well suited to stand in as an allegory for the writer at his desk, surveying the world before him. Yet we find him distracted and inattentive, playfully sealing the letter (as if it were of no particular importance) and surely taking little notice of the world beyond the window. There is a hint of an explanation in the professional identification of Georg as a businessman, as if the alienation from

the world, his inattention, as well as the guilt that will be imputed to him in the course of the narration, were consequences of capitalist culture and the regime of private property in which he is located. At least this is a possible point of departure for a Marxist approach to "Das Urteil." Yet those class indicators are also standard markers for nineteenth-century realism, and it is that literary culture that is being prepared for scrutiny through the remarkable subtlety of the first paragraph. Realistic expectations are being raised and undermined at the same time. As J. P. Stern has noted, "In Kafka's story, the sensational is avoided because the transition from the realistic to the surrealistic or fantastic is gradual" (119). The collapse of realistic epistemology, which will be carried out in the father's judgment and Georg's death, is in effect already announced between the lines of the superficial order of the placid beginning.

In addition to this subversion of realistic description, the text, from the outset, introduces an irritation with regard to narrative perspective. From the "It was a Sunday morning" of the beginning, the reader is led to expect an omniscient narrator discussing the object of the story, Georg, his subjectivity, and his objective standing in the world. The first paragraph shifts quickly from the narrator's view of the row of houses to Georg's perspective, the landscape across the river. This perspectival disruption is continued, alternating between objectifying description and subjective point of view, when the narrator and the reader appear to be aligned with Georg's subjectivity itself, particularly through the use of indexical terms. Thus the suggestion is made that the friend in St. Petersburg move his business "here"; later, it is reported that Georg's business has "now" grown: as if the narrator and the reader were assumed to share Georg's here and now. The realistic convention of distinguishing neatly between the omniscience of the narrator and the limited subjectivity of a character has disappeared for Georg, although it is also maintained, insofar as the other figures, in particular the father, continue to be treated as objects of reportage. The father's thinking is nowhere as exposed as is Georg's, and consequently the reader is asked to accept a story about Georg, from the outside so to speak, while also participating directly in Georg's thought. The separation between the subjective interiority of the private room and the objective external view, which turns out to be unsustainable in any case, is similarly undermined through the formal structure of the narrative itself. The individual, or bourgeois, autonomy enfigured by Georg at his desk is losing its underpinnings.

The conclusion of the story is equally complex. At first, Georg's demise would appear to signify the absolute reversal of the celebration of his autonomy in the opening scene, the transition from comfortable privacy

to his public execution. The complacent worldview of the outset has been demolished. Yet just as that beginning is far from one-dimensional, already signaling problems about to erupt, the conclusion cannot be read simply as the abnegation of the hero. The father is reported to collapse in the wake of the judgment, indicating a more variegated relationship to his son than the simplistic model of a stereotypical father-son conflict would permit. The encounter with the maid in the stairway, including her call to Jesus and her covering her face, is intimated to be a missed opportunity, placed in a curiously opposite relationship to Georg — "aber er war schon davon" (*L* 52; "but he was already gone," *CS* 87) — although the significance of the conjunction "but" is nowhere explicated. Even more perplexing is the role of the retarding moment, when Georg has jumped over the railing but is still holding onto the bridge. The execution has been delayed for an instant, allowing Georg to profess his love for his parents and to wait until a bus passes, presumably in order to drown out the sound of his fall and to allow for his death in a paradoxically public anonymity.

If the insistence on the security of privacy at the outset of "Das Urteil" is subverted through the unraveling of a realist epistemology, the corollary at the conclusion is that the irrevocably terminal character of Georg's plunge, the carrying out of the execution, is qualified in several different ways. It is as if the conclusion were less conclusive than the plot itself would suggest. As noted, the father collapses, and with him, the easy binary opposition of father and son, judge and criminal, is at least called into question. The two are not opposites but, on the contrary, participants in a shared regime, characterized possibly by some guilt (if such can be determined). In that case, however, it is a collective responsibility and not an individual culpability. That "Das Urteil" is not a narrative of Georg's fate alone is indicated furthermore by the complex of imagery of love: the maid's "Jesus," Georg's call to his parents, and the approach of the "Autoomnibus," a term which etymologically announces the problem of the autonomous individual in relation to the comprehensive collective (*L* 52). (To this network of signs, one should also add the references to St. Petersburg, the Russian cleric, and the father's claim to be the representative of the friend: all indications of a Christian semiotics of representation.) If the fall into the river suggests a baptismal possibility of rebirth, so too does the redemptive invocation of "unendlicher Verkehr," the last words of the story: never ceasing traffic, that is, the ongoing life of the human community, but also endless intercourse in a specifically sexual sense. Stanley Corngold writes of the "joy and sheer force of the 'Verkehr,' the erotic upsurge and infinite traffic of the concluding sentence" (40). The initial

impression that the story concludes with Georg's death in the wake of the father's pronouncement turns out to be not quite right, given the father's fate, the invocations of community, and the intimation of the possibility of love and rebirth. In this light, it is especially important to note that while we read that Georg lets himself fall from the bridge, the text does not in fact report his death. On the contrary, in the place of death, we learn of the infinite traffic, with its multiple connotations, surely quite distinct from a definitive and fully terminal conclusion. Whether Georg's death is muffled beneath the passing of the bus, or the infinite traffic somehow redeems him, is left undecided by the text itself.

Thus the most basic frame of the story leads into an interpretive vortex. The reader's first approximation of the plot cannot fail to trace an arc from the protective environment of Georg's room on a Sunday morning in spring to the presumption of absolute destruction through the plunge from the bridge. The discrepancy between beginning and end necessarily elicits efforts to make sense out of the report: what could possibly justify the execution of the nice young man who had been writing a letter to his friend one fine Sunday morning? Yet the enigma of "Das Urteil" is that the beginning and end stand in a closer and less exclusive relationship than the veneer of the plot suggests. If there is an alternative path into "Das Urteil," it has to begin with the recognition that the tension between Georg at his desk and Georg on the bridge is less stringent than appears initially. In that case, the narration turns out to be not at all about a reversal of fortune, certainly not an individual's misfortune, but rather about the nature of judgment in general and its relation to fortune and the way of the world. To explore this option requires a closer look at the fabric of the story and the character of the discourse in between the opening and the end, which have turned out to be less polar in their opposition than the reader might have initially estimated.

If the beginning and the end of "Das Urteil" are linked, it is due to a stated problem, a discursive discrepancy between a normative expectation of deliberative speech and the constantly elusive, hermetic substance of individual topics. On the one hand, both Georg and the father (in different ways, to be sure) engage in processes approximating rational argument, either directly in their exchange or, in Georg's case, indirectly in his reported thought process. These deliberations invite the reader to accept rational debate as a proper standard, that is, a certain logical, nearly jurisprudential modality of argument is established as a background measure for evaluating various decisions, such as Georg's choosing to inform his friend of the engagement, or the father's verdict itself. Kafka's repeated

deployment of deliberative speech frames the material and suggests that judgment is, in the end, supposed to make sense. Yet repeatedly the text demonstrates a disjunction between these deliberations and their topic. Pursuing this line of inquiry is tantamount to the recognition that what may be at stake here is a judgment not so much on Georg but on the possibility of judgment altogether.

The critique of judgment is most salient in the treatment accorded to evidence in the text. Deliberative speech presumes evidence, which is the topic of the deliberation, just as it assumes the possibility of interpreting that evidence. It insists that, in order to render judgment, reference be made to facts and to the significance that those facts are imputed to entail. These are expectations that Kafka insinuates through the justificational claims made by Georg and by his father. Yet these are hardly outlandish or unfamiliar to the reader, for they form the basis of modern understandings of legal process: proper judgment is presumed not to be arbitrary, but must instead be based on adequate evidence and its proper evaluation, according to established rules of argument.

In "Das Urteil," however, while the expectations regarding the quality of deliberation are announced, most evidence is indicated, in one way or another, to be corrupt and inconclusive, open to such a range of interpretation that it turns out to be useless for the cases at hand. Among the more salient examples of this subversion of evidentiary argumentation, one can point to the explanations for Georg's rise in the family business. The comments are part of a passage that is surely ascribed to the narrator, and therefore one might expect to find an exercise of narrative omniscience. Instead, one faces a series of three distinct accounts, each prefaced with a "perhaps," and the last of which is, in effect, no rational explanation at all, but rather an invocation of fortunate accidents (Swales 360). Thus, in the context of presumably rational deliberation on the nature of the correspondence between Georg and his friend and, more specifically, on the nature of Georg's business success, the very basis of the argument, the evidentiary underpinning, is declared to be merely conjecture. This is a crucial point, since the father will later accuse his son of conspiring against him in the business.

This disjunction between a formally rational argument and inadequate or incompatible supporting evidence occurs repeatedly. The pertinent facts are either inconclusive or inappropriate to the claims made. To prove Georg's affection for his father, the narrator references their taking lunch in the same restaurant, but the passage leaves open whether they actually eat together. Indeed the image of their evenings, each with his own newspaper, suggests more separation than comity. Similarly, it is

reported that Georg's Russian friend failed to express adequate sympathy at the news of the death of Georg's mother, and this is taken to be symptomatic of the worrisome social alienation imputed to the friend alone in a distant land. Yet we also learn that the friend did in fact urge Georg to join him in Russia, an expression of affection that stands in marked contrast to Georg's own vacillation on whether to invite the friend to his wedding. Hence the very premise of Georg's judgment of his friend, the friend's social isolation, is not at all corroborated by this particular point; indeed the facts could be taken to prove the opposite, not the friend's disaffection, but Georg's.

The disjunction between argumentative claim and asserted fact even characterizes moments of seemingly uncontroversial discourse. Georg's noticing that the father has kept his window closed leads the father to indicate that this is his preference. Georg then replies that it is warm outside, "wie in Anhang zu dem Früheren" (*L* 44; "as if continuing his previous remark," *CS* 81). It is by no means clear what the innocuous comment about the weather is intended to mean: an extension of the implied criticism that the window is not open or a confirmation of the father's preference for keeping it closed. It is as if rational exchange were being simulated, but its lack of substance becomes clear at each point, even in a discussion about the weather. The text signals this slide toward a decomposition of argument, that is, the absence of a compelling logic, by indicating that the subsequent remark is only "as if continuing" what had preceded.

Finally, it should be noted that it is not only Georg but his father as well for whom deliberative pronouncements are subverted by the slipperiness of the facts. His opening attack on Georg is characterized by a series of statements that retract aspects of the implied accusations. At first he complains that Georg may not be telling him the whole truth, but then proceeds to limit his own discourse by promising to avoid matters not relevant, that is, presumably not pertinent to the discussion of the friend. Having attacked Georg for not being fully forthcoming, he is effectively announcing that he too will exclude certain topics from discussion. Yet he immediately reverses himself by invoking reportedly unfortunate events, otherwise unspecified, that have taken place since his wife's death. He emphasizes twice that "maybe" (vielleicht) the time will come for their deliberation (*CS* 82; *L* 45). Thus the accusation is suggested but nearly voided in the same instant. Similarly, he proceeds to suggest that he may be missing aspects of the business, implying that Georg could be deceiving him, while explicitly refraining from making such a claim. These several interlinear accusations become even less accessible to any potential rational

defense by Georg, because the father also concedes that his own memory is fading. The consequence of the passage is therefore to suggest a wide range of misdeeds on Georg's part, within a rhetoric of rational judgment, while at the same time keeping any specific facts at arm's length and, indeed, most specific accusations as well. Any effort to explain the accusation in a manner that would allow for a properly deliberative rejoinder would be constrained by the irreducible gap between rational norm and an ultimately unreachable experience, beyond precise specification.

Deliberation in "Das Urteil" is therefore robbed of the sustenance that relatively secure factual evidence might be expected to provide. In addition, deliberation fails in a second sense with regard to summative judgments as well; that is, just as the evaluation of (elusive) particular points has been seen to be inadequate, the comprehensive verdicts turn out to be untenable. Neither Georg's judgment of the friend (the first verdict we encounter) nor the father's judgment on Georg (the second verdict) turns out, on close scrutiny, to display a compelling logic. On the contrary, argument and experience appear to be at odds in both cases, although the contradictory character of judgment functions differently in each. The text foregrounds Georg's ostentatious displays of concern for his friend. These in turn are belied however by his deep-seated reluctance to invite him to the wedding. Indeed his repeatedly professed concerns for the friend's well-being appear to be little more than excuses to keep him away. Thus Georg's judgment of the friend and his situation in Russia are a function of a complex psychological motivation, which have been explored by many critics. Hidden concerns, buried beneath the surface, force Georg to rationalize his unwillingness to issue the invitation. It is here that Kafka's interest in Freud and Nietzsche comes to the fore, the recognition of ulterior and unconscious motives. As Gerhard Kurz has written, "The archaeological impulse, the search for the 'city beneath the cities,' unites Nietzsche, Freud, and Kafka in a single configuration as modern excavators of the human psyche" (128). Georg's insistence to his father that his initial hesitation to inform his friend of the wedding was driven only by his consideration for the friend's well-being — "aus keinem anderen Grunde sonst" (*L* 45; "that was the only reason," *CS* 82) — is stated so emphatically that a critical reader must surely see through the pretextuous nature of the claim.

While Georg's judgment of his friend is patently fraudulent, the dubiousness of deliberative speech holds all the more for the father's estimation of Georg. In this second case, the tenuous nature of judgment is demonstrated emphatically by the interpolation of multiple self-contradictions into the discourse of the father. His bitter attacks on his son are under-

mined repeatedly by the self-negating character of his own speech. Thus he first calls into question the very existence of the friend in St. Petersburg only in order to reverse himself by insisting that he has maintained a clandestine connection to that self-same friend and indeed represents him legally in his homeland. In a second example, he appears to accuse Georg of delaying his marriage for too long and, simultaneously, to criticize his aspiration to marry at all. Georg ends in a double bind: his engagement to Frieda is both too early and too late. Finally, the father's judgment on Georg's character is equally oxymoronic. Georg stands accused of aspiring to independence and maturity too ambitiously (in the business and in the engagement), while he is also attacked for still being childish: a "Spassmacher" (joker) and his father's "Früchtchen" (offspring, literally: little fruit). Clearly the accusations hurled at Georg are mutually exclusive. It is impossible to identify a clear logic in the father's condemnation that might encompass the various and mutually incompatible elements of the tirade. In other words, judgment is certainly rendered, and quite harshly, but the judgment does not meet the standard of normativity established earlier by the deliberative discourse. In the case of Georg's evaluation of his friend, the text suggests ulterior motives that color the judgment: hence the incompatibility of argument and conclusion. In the case of the father's verdict on his son, we simply face the blatant untenability of the several assertions. In both instances, "Das Urteil" points to the structural weakness inherent in judgments, no matter how inescapable the act of judging may be.

The weakness of judgment has at least two sources. The first involves the use of language: for all of Kafka's own linguistic precision, Georg is frequently unable to control his speech. Language gets the better of him, or remains beyond his grasp, sometimes erratic, sometimes recalcitrant, but never fully under his control. Without an effective command of language, he is hardly in a position to argue his own case. Evidently, the logic of argumentative judgment cannot count on the linguistic capacity that it would require to be successful. Consequently, language can have unintended consequences, as in the correspondence with the friend: attempting to make vacuous small talk, Georg elicits a curiosity by reporting a stranger's marriage, which he had mentioned merely as a way to avoid more substantive topics. Alternatively, his several interjections during the father's outburst, all intended to ward off the attack, turn out to be pitifully inadequate. He lacks the rhetorical prowess to mount a compelling counter-argument. In addition, judgment is further destabilized by a second deficiency, the progressive decomposition of Georg's subjectivity. Facing his father, he is described as increasingly forgetful,

losing the coherence of consciousness that would be necessary to mount a defense. This stands in marked contrast to the staging of a self-assured autonomy in the opening scene, although there too Georg's slide into distraction was already quite pronounced. The loss of memory in the exchange with the father can be taken to corroborate the father's implicit accusation that the son has forgotten his deceased mother. Georg's presentism entails a gradual repression of the past; if there is a judgmental moral to be drawn from his execution, it is that the loss of a past implies the loss of a future as well.

The particular genius of the work is that, demonstrating the faults that adhere to any process of judgment, it still draws the reader inexorably into an obligation to judge. Yet any judgment on "Das Urteil" is unlikely to escape the fate of judgment that the narrative itself has displayed. One possible critical response, confirmation of the verdict, must ascribe a logical coherence to the father's accusation that is absent in the text itself. Alternatively, efforts to retract the judgment and to defend Georg derive primarily from a modernist or tendentially feminist bias against the patriarchal authority of the father and would, taken consistently, argue to reverse any conviction (Neumann 220–21). Finally, to judge the text a demonstration of the impossibility of judgment altogether involves the critic in the performative contradictions of postmodern sensibility: insisting that judgment is impossible, in an imagined world of absolute indeterminacy, but nonetheless partaking willingly in the prerogatives and privileges of a judge (Corngold 40).

It is however impossible to take sides with either the accuser or the defendant, since both of their arguments are marred by major flaws. Nor can a close reader of "Das Urteil" declare the impossibility of judgment altogether — a claim obviously contradicted both by the central event of the narrative and the critic's own reading process. On the contrary, the story simultaneously demonstrates a necessity of judgment and a universal complicity in guilt. Both Georg and his father judge, and both share in a guilt (which is why the father collapses as his son runs — presumably — to his death). Moreover, in the course of his conversation with Frieda, Georg implicates his friend in the guilt, while it is after all Frieda's insistence on Georg writing the letter to the friend that precipitates the crisis. If "Das Urteil" appears on first reading to be Georg's story (an effect heightened by the interior monologues), on reflection it grows increasingly expansive. From the single, private room, it turns into a father-son conflict, which is broadened by the roles of Frieda, the friend, and the mother, and on the margins, the Russian monk and the masses, until the arrival of the "Autoomnibus" and the infinite traffic.

This widening in the course of the narrative lends extra weight to the father's accusation that Georg has only thought of himself. Guilt is inherent in the process of individuation and self-enclosure; the alternative is the embrace of the multiple relations of a community. Georg's initial self-absorption has hardly led to a genuine independence. On the contrary, the isolated autonomy of the beginning is nothing more than the beginning of the end for the weak individual, complicitous in a condition of universal alienation. Hence not only his incapacity to defend himself with argument but his obedient acceptance of the verdict. The ultimate problem of "Das Urteil" is not the dubious quality of the father's pronouncement — we know that any judgment will necessarily be tenuous — but rather Georg's acquiescence. What sort of culture produces a personality so willing to conform, even to the point of self-destruction?

It is a culture of self-absorbed isolation, a culture of narcissism, in which the individual is so self-centered that he becomes self-blind (Lasch). It is a culture in which self-interest has become congruent with betrayal: Georg's betrayal of his friend and the memory of his mother, as well as his disregard for his father. It is however above all a culture characterized by a degraded mode of writing, for the text in which Kafka achieved his own breakthrough to literary maturity is very much about writing. It is the author Georg, the type of the isolated, reflective, and distracted writer, whom we meet at the outset. We learn that he is quite satisfied to generate texts intentionally devoid of substance and that he attempts to use language strategically in order to manipulate the reader. It is a writing furthermore that appears to require no particular effort, as he closes the letter with playful slowness. Yet the most trenchant characterization of this literary world is the verb: Georg has just completed, "beendet," the text, and it is this term that recurs in an inverted variation in the conclusion, "unendlicher Verkehr," "unending" traffic (*L* 52; *CS* 88). The implicit criticism inherent in "Das Urteil" and directed against established literary life entails its complacent capacity of closure, closed forms and closed minds, associated with an isolated and therefore weakened subjectivity. Georg's text stands alone, and it is for that reason facile and mendacious, an epistolary corollary to the degraded realism of the culture industry implicitly invoked in the stereotypical images of the first sentence. "Das Urteil" presents an alternative: a literature that is open to the community, its traditions, and its past, a canonic literature that has the capacity to achieve a public and collective life. The vision of the Russian priest who has cut a cross in his hand suggests an authentic writing, presaging the corporeal script of "In der Strafkolonie" (In the Penal Colony). The liberal individual at his writing desk, for all of his professed sincerity and enlight-

enment, turns out to be willing to acquiesce in his own self-destruction and is incapable of an independent judgment of substance; in contrast, the religious masses can carry out a revolution. Kafka's appeal to a literature that resonates with the profundity of tradition, that is an "Angelegenheit des Volkes" (a matter of the people), as he wrote in the famous diary entry of 25 December 1911, represents one of the most severe verdicts on the culture of modernity, with its loss of memory, its atomism, and its perpetual flight from the difficult complexity inherent in any judgment.

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