
Derrida on Kafka's "Before the Law"

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As an advanced practice of reading, deconstruction never could have replaced the basic close reading of texts developed in conjunction with the new criticism. Such attention to the close-grained texture of the text is too necessary both to pedagogy and scholarly explication alike. As itself a particular form of close reading, deconstruction never would have replaced such practices. At greater issue are the purposes to which close and attentive reading are put: the degree to which interpretive practices assume, imply, and more and less consciously pursue particular hermeneutical strategies and draw on normative models of the literary text. As two practices of close reading, new criticism and deconstruction—which are broadly rhetorical and philosophical in their ethos respectively—have a more interesting point of contrast in their relations to formalism, to such notions of a theoretical “model” or set of variously conscious and articulated normative expectations of what the literary text and the interpretive act should/ought to/must have in view. If such norms are in fact the source of assumptions about and designs upon the aesthetic object of the literary text and the hermeneutical strategies of critical inquiry and debate, then both new criticism and deconstruction have at the very least their respective formalist implications. We can examine more substantive notions of literary form as aesthetic object and of critical response as hermeneutical model in relation to the new critical view of the text of T.S. Eliot and the critical exploration by Derrida of a particularly dense and concise text by Kafka, titled “Before the Law.” What is exposed by Kafka’s text in relation to Derrida’s reading of it is the need for Kantian critical reflection on what we bring to the act of reading and critical debate.

In one of the classic position essays of what subsequently came to be termed the New Criticism, T.S. Eliot, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” describes the basis for the sovereignty of the text upon which New Criticism founded its approach: “The effect of the work of art upon the person who enjoys it,” writes Eliot, “is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art” (809). Eliot makes this observation preliminary to introducing a key distinction that supports one of the central purposes of his essay: the presentation of what he names his “impersonal theory of poetry” (809). Eliot distinguishes between emotion and

feeling, such that feeling affords the poet who writes and the reader who rightly reads a medium of dispassionate and disinterested perception that transcends the partiality and individuality of merely personal and subjective emotion. Such a conception of the sovereign autonomy of the artwork has good pedigree, drawing in part upon the aesthetics of Kant, who finds in the artwork what he terms “subjective universal communicability” (*Critique* 5: 217), because of its capacity to afford knowledge of a unique arena of experience that is too complex and interior to submit to the unity of conceptual reason: “aesthetic art, as beautiful art, is one that has the reflecting power of judgment and not mere sensation as its standard ... on [which] rests that pleasure which is alone universally communicable though without being grounded on concepts” (5: 306). In representing common and potentially universal human experience, artworks afford a kind of knowledge, but insofar as they are composed of representations and figures rather than of concepts, that knowledge remains subjective and non-conceptual, but at the same time *a priori* and universal, grounded in an idea of the imagination, rather than of conceptual reason (*Critique* 5: 314).

It was in such a palpable and yet indefinable (a subjective, non-conceptual, yet universal) unity of aesthetic form that New Criticism found an object that could provide a distinctive (if constitutively vague) disciplinary foundation for literary studies. Over and against the philological and historical methods that arose within the study of classical literature, New Criticism found in the putative but elusive concrete universality of the literary text a sufficiently empirical object that could provide the study of modern literature a place in the university alongside the natural and social sciences. In its investment in a non-conceptual and subjective universality, new critical formalism could turn its pragmatic attention both to the act of interpretation and to the empirical historical ground of the literary text, finding in that text a concrete enough object of study to provide both a rationale for literary history and an apparatus of textual and historical scholarship. And yet, the empirical and aggregative study of literary history and the subjective act of interpretation (the claims to universality and objectivity of which remaining very much at issue) persist in uneasy and problematic relation in the emerging discipline of English Studies in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.¹ To considerable extent empirical, strategic, and pragmatic in motivation, New Criticism tended to remain shy of—some would argue defensive in relation to—theoretical elaboration and foundation. In its focus, however, on the specifically formal character of the literary text, it does not entirely shun theoretical elaboration. Consider, for example, Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature*, which went through three editions between 1949 and 1984, and still remains in print.

The literary text, at least in the era of the printed book, may subsist in empirical texts, but insofar as it consists of language, of discourse, and of the structure of genres, the literary artwork is an inherently formal rather than empirically measurable or even determinate entity. As a form of words, the literary text is not very susceptible to empirical measurement (though there is indeed a discipline of empirical literary studies: IGEL). Nor have the numerous New Critical attempts to define the specifically literary object in appropriately theoretical, philosophical, or rhetorical terms been received with especially widespread enthusiasm or agreement. New Criticism is characterized rather more as a congeries of critical and interpretive practices than as an impulse toward theoretical inquiry and reflection.

In taking a closer look at Eliot's assertion of the distinctiveness of the artwork, we notice that his affirmation takes a largely negative form: "The effect of the work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art" ("Tradition" 809). Eliot strategically identifies these unique qualities largely by means of negation, more in terms of what they are not than what they are. This is in keeping with the subjective, non-conceptual character of the experience of the artwork in Kant.² He goes on in the essay to argue in favor of an objectivity and detachment associated with classically impersonal aesthetic feeling, as opposed to the tendency to the indulgent (in Kantian terms, personal and interested, rather than disinterested³) subjectivity of mere Romantic emotion. The kind of objectivity Eliot describes consists in the primarily interior and psychological conception and mode of operation of the act of poetic composition—in what he calls "the escape from personality" ("Tradition" 810) that gives access to the peculiar autonomy of aesthetic impersonality. The poem, to adapt a term of Eliot's, persists as an "objective correlative" of that interior aesthetic response.⁴

The kind of formalism of the aesthetic object, of the literary text, that we find in Eliot and in the later New Critics fostered the firm establishment and strong growth of English studies in the Anglo-American university of the mid-twentieth century.⁵ The emergence from the 1970s forward of vigorous theoretical challenges to the New Critical status quo is familiar to all of us, and that clash of theories of the text and of interpretation, in concert with other, quite unprecedented developments more widely in the culture and the academy, have led to a highly complex, uncertain, in some respects chaotic present condition in English studies.⁶ If we can no longer go back behind the need to reflect theoretically on our practice of scholarship and interpretation, then more clarity is desirable in our conception of the relation between the practice of scholarship and interpretation and the way in which we follow and apply their theoretical implications. One of the most dramatic theoretical modalities to challenge the hegemony of New Critical

assumptions has been deconstruction. I will pose here an encounter between New Critical and deconstructionist interpretive assumptions, using a short text by Kafka titled "Before the Law" (3-4).⁷ Derrida wrote one of his more lucid and accessible interpretations of a literary text on this short story, and finds within it an allegorical configuration of the relation between text and reader. Kafka's parable will allow an exposure in bold and manageable form of the relation between the view of the literary text we find in Eliot and the New Criticism generally as well as the view we find in deconstruction, despite the vaunted ostensible incompatibility between their assumptions.

"Before the Law" adopts the allegorical form characteristic of parables. The two main characters are described as types—as a man from the country and a doorkeeper—rather than named as persons. The story opens: "Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the law." All of the elements of the story are present in these opening lines. There are the law and a doorkeeper, and so by implication there is a door. And there is a man who comes from the country to request access to the law. The law and the doorkeeper are apparently urban, the man from the country seeming to stand in the relation of a rustic to the doorkeeper's sophistication. The law remains throughout an allegorical abstraction, its only specificity given by means of the expectations and assumptions of the man from the country. The doorkeeper refuses his request for entry through the door of the law, allowing him merely to peer into the precincts, at the same time warning him that there are numerous doorkeepers, each more powerful and terrible than the one before. "These are difficulties," the narrator tells us, "that the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone." The expectation on the part of the man from the country of free, equal, universal access is an unsophisticated view in that it does not foresee the exploitation of right by the might of the doorkeeper, does not anticipate that a law supposedly governing all would be controlled by a few.

Because of the frightening appearance and commanding manner of the doorkeeper, and the assurance that, although he is not allowed in at present he may be at some time in the future, the man elects to wait outside the door to the law. He sacrifices all he possesses to bribe the doorkeeper, waiting fruitlessly for years, diminishing steadily, until finally, with death approaching, all his years of waiting, we are told, "gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper.... 'Everyone strives to reach the law,' says the man, 'so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has begged for admittance?'" The second of the man's assumptions regarding the law, then, is

that everyone will necessarily strive to reach the law as the goal of all his or her efforts. The doorkeeper sees that the man from the country is dying and, in the concluding words of the story, gives a brutally straight answer to his final question: “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.” With an uncanniness characteristically Kafkaesque, the text closes down on readers with the same finality as for the man from the country.⁸ The parable is at once an effective allegory and a powerful performance of the drama and dilemma of interpretation. Initially drawn to identify sympathetically with the man from the country and his desire to gain access to what should be “accessible at all times and to everyone,” by the end of the story we are wearied of the man’s submission to the doorkeeper and, if not sympathetic to the latter’s authority at least ready and willing to reach the conclusion of such an impasse. Both our readerly appetite for access to the literary significance of the text and our urbane awareness of the enigmatic character of the literary text are engaged by these archetypal figures of countryman and doorkeeper. In drawing us into the drama of reading and then so emphatically shutting us out, the parable performs the dynamic it signifies and signifies what it performs. We part from the text knowing, worldly readers sensing in the doorkeeper’s harsh ruling the inescapable singularity of our subject positions as readers who have bid for admittance to the literary law of the text. As students never tire of reminding us, everyone has his or her own interpretation of a text, and we can make little headway unless willing to affirm that they are perfectly, if only partially, right—that the idiomatic particularity of our perspectives on the text makes it all the more necessary to share with others the act of interpretation, dialogically and in writing. But to follow out the implications of our allegory, what precisely is, then, the door of interpretation, such that it can allow for free ingress and egress, for a substantive encounter between text and reader, between reader and reader, between the two aspects of ourselves as readers, eager person from the country and critic-doorkeeper?

As Eliot would have it in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the experience of the artwork makes itself available only to those who are willing to leave behind their merely subjective and emotional responses and to give themselves over to impersonal, disinterested feeling. “Poetry,” he says,

is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (810)

Eliot takes here a doorkeeper’s position, insisting that we shed the garments of our subjectivity at the door of the text. He adopts the stance of the high priest of

poetry, affirming the mysterious transcendence of the artwork, unapproachable by anything so rustic and uninitiated as our particular personalities. The real proof of having a personality for Eliot is the willingness to sacrifice it, a classical and Judeo-Christian heroic view which accords well with the other prime preoccupation of the essay, the organic unity of the European literary and cultural tradition and the necessary conformity of the poet to it, rather than to the then reigning innovations of Romantic artistic individuality.

Jacques Derrida gives to his 1982 essay on Kafka's "Before the Law" the same title as the story itself. He does so in order to signal and to explore the relationship taken up in the parable between title and text, door and law, doorkeeper and man from the country, and by allegorical extension, text and reader, text and writer. Derrida sees in Kafka's parable an exemplary instance of the peculiar kind of differential relations he signified in the neologism *différance*. The doorkeeper's endless deferral of the man's request for entrance, keeping him waiting for a lifetime on the hither side of the aperture to the law, configures the material interdependence of difference and deferral that Derrida embodies in this key construct of deconstruction. *Différance* inscribes in its graphic eccentricity of spelling the dual sense of spatial difference and temporal deferral implicit in the various senses of the French word *différence*. In giving to *différance* an alternative spelling, one that does not affect pronunciation and so is detectable only in the written form of the word, Derrida reinforces a quality and property of written discourse that he argues is inherent in language as a whole. In taking up space as well as time, written discourse makes unavoidably evident what Derrida argued has been consistently repressed in the dominant theory of language and of epistemology in the Western tradition, a correspondence theory of language that assumed a relationship of relative independence and externality between language and meaning, between the registers of signifier and signified, form of language and content of message.

Derrida finds in Kafka's "Before the Law" a text that explores the undecidable relation between signified and signifier, between the conceptual universality of the law and the singularity and individuality of the man from the country. The man seeks access to the law because it is universal and applies to everyone, and he is denied access because he is not everyone, but only himself and no one else. The corporeality of the man's difference, that he is the body that he is occupying the time and space that only he occupies, becomes in the words of the doorkeeper the very door that closes upon his dying awareness. "This gate was made only for you. I am now going to close it."

A key passage in his argument in which he focuses on the allegorical range and performative subtlety of the parable conveys some of the flavor of Derrida's

engagement with Kafka's text. Quoting the just-cited final lines of the story, Derrida's comments:

And this is the final word, the conclusion or closure of the story.

The text would be the door, the entrance (*Eingang*), what the doorkeeper has just closed. And to conclude, I shall start from this judgment, with this conclusion of the doorkeeper. As he closes the object, he closes the text. Which, however, closes on nothing. The story *Before the Law* does not tell or describe anything but itself as text. It does only this or does also this. Not within an assured specular reflection of some self-referential transparency—and I must stress this point—but in the unreadability of the text, if one understands by this the impossibility of acceding to its proper significance and its possibly inconsistent content, which it jealously keeps back. The text guards itself, maintains itself—like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say, of its non-identity with itself. It neither arrives nor lets anyone arrive. It is the law, makes the law and leaves the reader before the law.

To be precise. We are *before* this text that, saying nothing definite and presenting no identifiable content beyond the story itself, except an endless *différance*, till death, nonetheless remains strictly intangible. Intangible: by this I understand inaccessible to contact, impregnable, and ultimately ungraspable, incomprehensible. (210-211)

In observing that “the text guards itself, maintains itself—like the law, speaking only of itself, that is to say its non-identity with itself,” Derrida foregrounds that structural ambiguity mentioned in our discussion of the text in New Criticism. The text is a determinate, even material, certainly empirical form of words. It is these words, in this order. At the same time what is precisely literary about them, as potent and palpable as this might be to our experience, remains indeterminately elusive, certainly immaterial, perhaps structural, to some degree rhetorical. The text is a contradictory combination, in Kantian terms, of a uniquely intellectual sensation and multivalent figurative connotations.⁹ The notion of *différance* helpfully configures this oxymoronic density and dispersal of significance in and of the text, and effectively embodies the way we remain captive to the difference and deferral of the process of reading and to the dissemination inherent in our speaking and writing about it. In this sense deconstruction is a *reverse formalism*. Instead of foregrounding, in canonical formalist fashion, the elusive palpability of the literary object, deconstruction reminds us of the structural angularity and eccentricity not only of the text but also of our interaction with it. In its emphasis on the differential and disseminative action of language and of the text, on those qualities most evident in its written medium, deconstruction is a formalism of a more originary kind. It attributes to the “always already” character of language

a determining, structuring, influence not only on the path and itinerary of our thought and interpretation, but, more radically, it finds in the materiality of language a condition of possibility in what is given to us to think. As rich as is Derrida's probing of Kafka's parable, he is preoccupied there largely with the objective and self-occluding character of the text, as it is configured by the doorkeeper. As he says above, "The text guards itself, maintains itself—like the law, speaking only of itself." The reader, for Derrida, is in the position of the man from the country.

The parable itself, on the other hand, makes the point clearly that the law is not an objective entity: that the doorkeeper guards a law that is inaccessible even to him, and that he has no authority that is not in a real sense given to him by the actions, assumptions, and expectations of the man from the country.¹⁰ As the opening lines insist: "To this doorkeeper comes the man from the country and prays for admission to the Law." The man comes to the doorkeeper, assuming the law is within and permission of access is the doorkeeper's to give. Likewise, as the man lapses into infirmity, blindness, and death, the text tells us:

At length his eyesight begins to fail, and he does not know whether it is really darker or his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law.

If the man cannot tell if the darkness is real or an effect of his own vision, then of course the gateway through which flows the radiance of the law may be either exterior or interior, objective or subjective, actual or merely notional. The door made only for him that the doorkeeper claims he will now finally close is the door of the man's failing perception. The only gate over which the doorkeeper has any power is given to him in and through the very question asked of him. The man defers to him and in doing so enacts his difference, his exclusion, from the law. The doorkeeper's power arises from the man's assumption that the doorkeeper keeps something and knows something that he, the man from the country, must search out: something that in his rustic naiveté he thinks himself to lack. The law, the artwork, the literary text truly is accessible at all times and to everyone insofar as it is not only a material object, is not in anyone's exclusive guardianship, is not closed upon itself, cannot entirely withhold itself and succeed as text. It will not yield itself up to ownership and possession, however many obstacles created, intentionally and otherwise, by guardians of the text. And of course, the text is no more subject than it is object, is both subject and object, is neither an organic world in itself nor an opaque rebus. Neither is it a merely subjective readerly construct. Rather, it is a scene of encounter, a mediated, necessarily serial conversation, that is to say at the very least a dialectical encounter of subject with

object, and like all good encounters is by definition ongoing, inherently dynamic, necessarily destined to develop as the reader and the readerly community and their contexts change.

For Hegel, the key moment and goal of the dialectic of subject and object is the moment of recognition (111-119), and the content of that recognition of course is that subject and object are mutually determining, interdependent, and reciprocal: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (111). It is the failure of such recognition on the part of the subject that leads first to a sense of opposition, and then to alienation, potential conflict, and finally to domination and submission, master and slave, doorkeeper and man from the country. The master/slave relation, for Hegel, is not an example of realized dialectic, that is to say, of mutual recognition, but rather a symptom of its absence or failure:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (111)

It is this failure to see the mutuality of the relation between self and other that results in a struggle for domination. Such an impulse to domination is a pre-dialectical, dualistic reification, what we have identified in both New Criticism and in deconstruction as objectification, on the one hand as the sovereignty of the text and on the other as the determining precondition of language in constructing and deferring interpretation. They give rise to an approach to the literary text that either alienates the reader from the text or the text from the reader.

The “subjective universal communicability” that Kant attributes to aesthetic judgment finds in the artwork a content that every viewer encounters but which is so overdetermined in its significance and resonance as to be irreducible to merely linear formulation and strictly rational conceptualization. The feeling of subjectivity and the intuition of universality are in uneasy, aporetic mutual relation and dependency. We find in Kafka’s “Before the Law” a text that configures the pursuit of canonical truth and meaning as an irresolvable dilemma, as a structural aporia of access and interpretation.¹¹ Derrida describes this aporetic configuration with another metaphor, characterizing it as what he calls the text’s “unreadability.” While Derrida’s deconstructive strategy has its relevant domain, there is another, arguably more generative approach to Kafka’s text and to the problematic of interpretation it configures, and we look to another short text by Kafka for guidance.

In “On Parables” (457), Kafka provides a parable about parables themselves.¹² The text is a discussion of parables between two (or arguably three) voices. The

first is a realist voice that argues that parables are of no help with the challenges presented by the real world: “parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.” The defender of parables responds by suggesting that the everyday world is itself parabolic, rather than literal and pragmatic: “Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid yourself of all your daily cares.”

The question is: what would it mean to “become a parable”?¹³ “On Parables” provides only an angular, that is to say, a parabolic view, suggesting that the supposedly stable distinction between the realms of practical experience and of the allegorical resolution provided by the parable is itself to be understood allegorically: follow the parables and you will become one. How, we could ask, might that parabolic advice apply to a reading of “Before the Law”? In the latter, we observed that the gate over which the doorkeeper has power resides in the assumptions of the man from the country, the assumption that the law is outside him and requires a legal permission of access. The man defers to the doorkeeper and in doing so enacts his *différance*, his self-exclusion, from the law, a difference and deferral the doorkeeper asserts in the closing lines: “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.” The reader, then, does not construct or have constructed for her the gates of interpretation. She is herself those gates. The interpretive law that is accessible at all times and to everyone is neither subject nor object, but a coexistence and tension between the two, between the universality and the singularity of reading, an aporia before which we stand as readers. Among the most satisfying readers of Kafka, Adorno perhaps says this best:

Among Kafka’s presuppositions, not the least is that the contemplative relation between the text and the reader is shaken to its very roots.... Anyone who sees this and does not choose to run away must stick out his head, or rather try to batter down the wall with it at the risk of faring no better than his predecessors. As in fairy-tales, their fate serves not to deter but to entice. As long as the word has not been found, the reader must be held accountable. (246)

The door of the text is neither closed nor open, both closed and open. The question of whether such a dialectical relation is itself a closed or open one is likewise in its tension or antinomy both closed and open (and therefore of course also neither). It is a law of the type that neither forces nor can be enforced. For Kant the characteristic of moral law consists in our autonomously imposing that law on ourselves.¹⁴ The sovereignty of the work of art is the way it brings us face

to face with both our general participation as audience in the human condition and our autonomy as the particular reader that we are. We face that door (that was made only for us) between ourselves and the sovereign impersonality of the literary text, between ourselves and the community of readers.

Notes

¹ For Kant, in his characteristic dualism, the empirical and the aesthetic remain distinct: “It is an empirical judgment that I perceive and judge an object with pleasure. But it is an *a priori* judgment that I find it beautiful, i.e., that I may require that satisfaction of everyone as necessary” (*Critique* 5: 289).

²As Kant elaborates, in emphasizing the subjective, non-conceptual, and yet universal character of aesthetic response:

For since the ground of the pleasure is placed merely in the form of the object of reflection in general, hence not in any sensation of the object and also without relation to a concept that contains any intention, it is only the lawfulness in the empirical use of the power of judgment in general (unity of imagination with the understanding) in the subject with which the representation of the object in reflection, whose *a priori* conditions are universally valid, agrees; and since this agreement of the object with the faculties of the subjective is contingent, it produces the representation of a purposiveness of the object with regard to the cognitive faculties of the subject. (*Critique* 5: 190)

³ For Kant the distinction between aesthetic and moral response has to do with investment in the actuality of the object:

Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste. (*Critique* 5: 205)

⁴A term introduced by T.S. Eliot in his essay “Hamlet and His Problems” (1919). Eliot observes that there is something in Hamlet which Shakespeare cannot “drag into the light, contemplate, or manipulate into art,” at least not in the same way that he can with Othello’s jealousy, or Coriolanus’ pride. He goes on to deduce that “the only way of expressing emotion in the form or art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (*Selected Essays* 144-145; “Objective Correlative”).

⁵ For a discussion of the specifically English context of this emergence, Terry Eagleton’s “The Rise of English” (2008) remains one of the most lively and provocative.

⁶ For an important recent assessment, see Cusset.

⁷ This story also appears verbatim in the penultimate chapter of *The Trial* (“In the Cathedral” 234-236). I refer to its position there later in the argument, but since Derrida is more concerned with the parable itself, I retain that focus. For a lucid discussion of the implications of the parable in the context of the novel, see Ingeborg Henel, “The Legend of the Doorkeeper and Its Significance for Kafka’s Trial.”

⁸ One is reminded, in particular, of the ending of “The Judgment” (Kafka 77-88).

⁹ As Kant specifies: “Only where the imagination in its freedom arouses the understanding, and the latter, without concepts, sets the imagination into regular play is the representation communicated, not as thought, but as the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind” (5: 296).

¹⁰ In the context of *The Trial*, the primary responsibility of the man from the country is pressed on Joseph K. by the priest, along with the latter’s alignment with that character in the parable. In leading up to the offer of the parable, the priest who accosts Joseph K. in the cathedral, first advises him: “You cast about too much for outside help,’ said the priest disapprovingly” (232). And in introducing the parable: “You are deluding yourself about the Court,’ said the priest. ‘In the writings which preface the Law, that particular delusion is described thus: before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper comes a man from the country” (234). During the discussion of the traditions of debate over the interpretation of the parable, the priest emphasizes: “The patience with which [the doorkeeper] endures the man’s appeals during so many years, the brief conversations, the acceptance of the gift, the politeness with which he allows the man to curse loudly in his presence *the fate for which he himself is responsible*” (238; my emphasis).

¹¹ *A propos* of this, the priest in *The Trial* cites the commentators on the parable: “The right perception of any matter and misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other” (238).

¹² While I could have chosen to discuss the context of the parable in *The Trial* in the light of the interpretive line taken there, I have preferred to indicate such a line in the notes and to follow up the, as it were, more concisely parabolic implications. Adorno cites Benjamin in seeing parable as generically thematic to Kafka’s work as a whole:

Here, too, in its striving not for symbol but for allegory, Kafka’s prose sides with the outcasts.... Walter Benjamin rightly defined it as parable. 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: yet any effort to make this fact itself the key is bound to go astray by confounding the abstract thesis of Kafka’s work, the obscurity of the existent, with its substance. Each sentence says ‘interpret me’, and none will permit it. (246)

¹³ For a worthwhile discussion of “On Parables,” see Baum.

¹⁴ “The practical necessity of acting on the is principle—that is, duty—is in no way based on feelings, impulses, and inclinations, but only on the relation of rational beings to one another, a relation in which the will of a rational being must always be regarded as *making universal law*, because otherwise he would not be conceived as *an end in himself*” (Kant, *Groundwork* 101-102).

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