

Kafka's Angel: The Distance of God in a Post-Traditional World

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In June 1914, Franz Kafka found himself overwhelmed by his life. Struggling personally, professionally, and artistically he sat one night to compose a story in his diary of a man confronted by the Divine. In this story, never published outside of his diary, Kafka sought to measure the distance between God and the individual in a post-traditional world. The result was the story of an aborted mystical experience in which Kafka defined the post-traditional existential experience in terms of failure. In so doing, Kafka also defined the post-modern existential condition in terms of the overwhelming distance the individual feels from God.

“An angel, then!” I thought; “it has been flying towards me all the day and in my disbelief I did not know it. Now it will speak to me.”

—Franz Kafka, *The Diaries* (June 25, 1914)

In the middle months of 1914, Franz Kafka found himself drowning in a whirlpool of expectations, desires, and choices. In these months of personal, professional, and artistic crisis Kafka struggled to locate his authentic path in life; and he struggled with the very idea of living. The year 1914 began for Kafka with a proposal of marriage to his then long time girlfriend, Felice Bauer. And the year 1914 ended for Kafka in a flurry of artistic creativity that produced one of the seminal novels of the twentieth century, *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*). In the intervening months Kafka struggled almost continuously with the most fundamental choices of his existence: between marriage and bachelorhood; between a steady, well-paid, professional position and the hand-to-mouth existence of a reclusive writer; between community and isolation; and between death and life. In all respects, these choices were not distinguishable for Kafka. They were not only interrelated, but they were also interdependent. For Kafka, marriage and a career at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute meant death. Bachelorhood and the daily effort to capture his world in fiction meant life.

In the midst of Kafka's disconcerting attempts to make this choice between death and life, the world around him was being radically transformed. In June of 1914, the Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was assas-

sinated, sparking a World War that brought the last of the modern European empires crashing down around him. In 1914, the Ottoman Empire began the systematic extermination of the Assyrian and Armenian populations producing the first in a string of genocides that would plague the twentieth century. In that same year in Prussia, a 25-year-old by the name of Adolf Hitler enlisted in a Bavarian Regiment to fight for the Kaiser, thus beginning his infamous rise to power. And in June of 1914, amidst all this turmoil, God tried his best to send Franz Kafka a message—or so he imagined.

A Ceiling Angel

On the first two days of January 1914, Kafka composed two letters to Felice. The letter of January 1 went to great lengths to articulate the quite substantial sacrifices Felice would have to make to marry Kafka. The letter of January 2 came to the startling conclusion that, “marriage is the only means whereby the relationship between us—so very necessary to me—can be maintained” (Kafka 1973: 337). And while this was not the most romantic of proposals, especially considering Kafka concluded the letter with the command, “And now decide, Felice!” Kafka assured her in the letter that he in fact did love her “with everything that is good in me as a human being” (338). These two letters had followed a two-month estrangement between the couple that had been caused by Kafka calling an end to their first (unofficial and un-announced) engagement that had lasted from June to October the year before.

Kafka’s “New Year” proposal went unanswered for six weeks. In mid-February he received a non-committal postcard. At the end of February, Kafka went to see Felice in Berlin for what proved to be a futile and inconclusive meeting. By mid-March Kafka was disconsolate. In his diary of March 9, he described himself as “lost in every respect,” proclaiming, “What an effort to stay alive!” (Kafka 1976: 261). This effort at survival, in fact, produced in Kafka’s diary a rather fascinating self-interrogation where, over the course of multiple pages, he posed question after question to himself, and for each question produced an extensive answer. “I shall never forget F. in this place, therefore shan’t marry. Is that definite?” “But you could have married, couldn’t you?” “Why do you give up all hope eventually of having F.?” “Didn’t your previous behaviour likewise seem hopeless from F.’s point of view?” “Then what do you want to do?” “Leave your job?” “Then what do you want to do?” “Aren’t you going there because of F.?” “Are you

healthy?" (261-264). Kafka, the lawyer, was quite ruthless with his witness, the ne'er-do-well suitor. The suitor's final response was succinct, and telling. "No—heart, sleep, digestion" (264).

A week's more silence from Felice produced in Kafka a feeling of "eternal helplessness" (266). Kafka's letters to her since their February meeting had all remained unanswered. On March 18, Kafka's mother wrote a brief and frank letter to Felice asking her to answer Franz one way or the other. Kafka meanwhile sent multiple letters to Grete Bloch, a close friend of Felice with whom Kafka had been carrying on a correspondence for some time, asking her to pressure Felice to answer. Unable to stand it any longer, Kafka set a deadline for Felice to respond to his proposal. If he were not to hear from her by March 25, their entire relationship would be terminated. He sent word of this deadline not to Felice, but to Grete. Felice's response arrived just in the nick of time. By the end of the month the wedding was scheduled for September and an official engagement party was set for May 30. What should have brought an end to Kafka's inner turmoil, however, was really only the beginning. In the ensuing months Kafka found himself even more overwhelmed, as the once-distant prospect of marriage and a "settled" existence as husband and employee threatened to destroy all prospects of his becoming the writer he knew he could be—and more importantly, the writer he knew he should be.

By the middle of April, Kafka had come to realize that the choice he was facing was not between marriage and bachelorhood; nor was it between his love for Felice and his fear of commitment. Instead, he knew that he must choose between the true existence of the writer and a meaningless life as husband and insurance worker.

If only it were possible to go to Berlin, to become independent, to live from one day to the next, even to go hungry, but to let all one's strength pour forth instead of husbanding it here [in Prague], or rather—instead of one's turning aside into nothingness! (267).

The choice for Kafka was clear: to live as a writer far from Prague, or nothingness. A few days later Kafka lamented the passing days in which he was "incapable of writing even one word" (267). In a fit of melodramatic despair, he went so far as to proclaim in his diary, "Who will save me?" (267). What the ever self-aware, and ever-indecisive, Kafka failed to realize was that he was in fact independent. At thirty-one with both a university

and law degree in hand, there was no reason for him to feel truly tied to Prague or to his parent's home which he had never left. By 1914, he had not only already been published on several occasions (including a collection of his short prose pieces), but his writings had been very well received and he possessed numerous contacts in the publishing world. Kafka's dependence was self-imposed.

On May 1 Felice moved to Prague. By the end of the month Kafka was conscious of an impending struggle between who he was supposed to be and who he knew he should be. This "spiritual battle" (271) played itself out in a series of story fragments chronicled in his diary throughout May and June. And it surfaced in a series of letters he sent to Grete who was living in Berlin. Kafka's relationship with Grete is a point of mystery. Rarely mentioned in his diaries, Kafka wrote many letters to Grete expressing some of his most intimate thoughts concerning both his feelings for Felice and the concerns he had over their relationship. To Grete, Kafka confided a great deal, and probably a great deal more than he should have. His actual intentions in his relationship with Grete remain unclear, but it is quite obvious that she loved him deeply.¹ But Grete also loved her dear friend Felice; and the more intimate her epistolary relationship became with Kafka, the more uncomfortable she felt with it.

Kafka, Felice, and Grete were all in Berlin at the end of May and the engagement party went off as planned. Kafka, who was especially nervous before the trip, arrived back in Prague on June 6. For him, the event was an ordeal tantamount to imprisonment.

Back from Berlin. Was tied hand and foot like a criminal. Had they set me down in a corner bound in real chains, placed policeman in front of me, and let me look on simply like that, it could not have been worse. And that was my engagement (275).

And still he could not break himself from the conviction that Felice had become a necessity in his life. This was the pendulum of sentiment that Kafka had ridden since the day he met Felice. On one apex of the swing he was "convinced that I need F" (290). At the other apex of the swing was the conviction that he must "take refuge in some work" otherwise he would be "lost" (295) And in between these two opposing moments of clarity there was nothing but the rush of momentum that carried him back and forth—frequently producing in him the "longing for suicide" (259). On June

19, Kafka diagnosed this psychological malady as an aversion to personal relationships that he shared with his sister Ottla. “How the two of us, Ottla and I, explode in rage against every kind of human relationship” (290).

By the start of July, Kafka was nearly worn out. July 1: “Too tired” (292). July 5: “To have to bear and be the cause of such suffering” (293). These are the only two diary entries we find over the course of nearly a month. On July 10, the day before he was to leave for Berlin to meet with Felice and Grete, presumably to embark upon a shared vacation, Kafka wrote to Ottla, the youngest of his siblings and his dearest friend.

I will of course write you about Berlin. At the moment there is nothing definite to say about the question or about me. I write differently from what I speak, I speak differently from what I think, I think differently from the way I ought to think, and so it all proceeds into deepest darkness (Kafka 1977: 109).

The nature of the “question” at hand is not known, but one can assume that Kafka was somehow aware of what was about to happen. Upon showing up in Berlin, he found himself present at an inquisition where he was the accused and Felice, her sister Erna, and Grete stood as his accusers. It would appear that Grete, in a fit of both jealousy and guilt, had presented Felice with an overwhelming cache of evidence against the accused in the form of eight month’s worth of letters from Kafka to her. Kafka had no defense, and he provided none. From all reports, he remained silent as Felice proceeded to quote his very words to him. The *ad hoc* trial proceeded for a number of hours, but its result was a foregone conclusion. Felice had much evidence to present, and much to say. Kafka, guilty and probably to a certain extent relieved, withstood his prosecution with a resolute solemnity. In March, Kafka had put himself on trial only to see the proceedings end in a hung jury. In July, there would be neither a stay, nor an acquittal. Needless to say, the engagement ended that day.

Kafka from that point forward would always refer to this event as the “tribunal” (*Gerichtshof*), a not-too-obscure foreshadowing of his impending novel. And to a very large degree, this event stood as a critical event for Kafka. Now, unquestioningly free from the bonds of marriage, Kafka had no choice but to turn to his most sacred calling. Now there was nothing holding him back. By July 22, Kafka had made the decision to quit his job in Prague and move to Berlin to commit himself fully to his writing. A

week later, on July 29, we find a sketch for a character named “Joseph K.” in Kafka’s diary. Two days later we read, “now I will receive the award for living alone . . . I will write in spite of everything, absolutely; it is my struggle for self-preservation” (Kafka 1976: 300). The “everything” that Kafka was going to have to struggle “in spite of” was the complex aftermath of Austria declaring war on Serbia.

The day before, on July 28, 1914 the first domino had fallen in Europe creating a cataclysmic chain of events that would force nearly the entire continent (and parts of the rest of the world) to take sides. Within days, Kafka’s friends, family, and colleagues were being called to duty. His diary entry from the 29th begins by listing two friends immediately called to service. The same entry also explains how he would near-term be forced to move from his parent’s home to occupy his sister Elli’s apartment while she and her two children moved in with his parents, as Elli’s husband was one of the first to be called up. He also happened to run the family-owned asbestos factory, which meant that Kafka would be compelled to spend his late afternoons managing the factory after spending the first part of his day working at the Insurance Institute. His plans to quit his job and move to Berlin were indefinitely placed on hold. His reaction to the onset of war is darkly humorous, and all too revealing. August 2: “Germany has declared war on Russia—Swimming in the afternoon” (301).

Over the next five months Kafka would enter into one of his exceptionally productive periods—the likes of which fairly defined his literary efforts. During these months he would compose nearly all of *The Trial* and two short stories, “The Village Schoolmaster (The Giant Mole)” and “In the Penal Colony.” A year that had begun with a proposal, climaxed not with a wedding but an inquisition—and then a war. From both these events, and all the intrigue and drama that lay between, Kafka produced a powerful collection of narratives exploring the relationship of the individual to society, to the law, and to the self. And yet, possibly the most compelling and revealing text produced during 1914 was never published as a story, and as it appears, was never intended to be so. In the midst of all the turmoil that composed the middle months of 1914, Kafka captured a short story in his diary that marks quite possibly his most authentic expression of the crisis facing both him and his world.

On June 25, 1914, an untitled story appears in Kafka’s diary. It is the story of a solitary, isolated individual trapped in his room like a caged animal. There is nothing in the story to indicate that the man is literally trapped, but

there is also nothing to indicate that this man has any possibility (or intention) of escaping his confines. Instead, what the reader first encounters is an individual anxiously pacing about his room, busily examining every piece and part of his surroundings. The rug, the walls, the table, the picture of the landlady's dead husband, all receive thorough and repeated investigations. What the man is seeking is not known. All the reader observes is this man's overwhelming sense of agitation. Outside his open window "the noises of the narrow street beat in uninterruptedly" (290-291).

It is only when the man moves over to this open window to sit down quietly on the low sill and "for the first time" stop and settle himself, that he realizes something is about to happen—that something is trying to happen" (291). And finally, finally, unless I were mistaken, this room which I had so violently upset began to stir" (291). In the constant rush and excitement of his own dizzying existence the man was unable to notice the momentous event attempting to take place. There, on his ceiling, something incredible was happening. The entire ceiling, in fact, was suddenly overtaken by a tremor that began at the edges and quickly spread toward the center where "a shabby electric lamp was stuck" (291). And as the man sat there, staring at the ceiling, "little pieces of plaster broke off and with a distinct thud fell here and there," (291) while the ceiling itself became engulfed in waves of radiant color. This color—"or was it a light?"—fascinates the man who attempts to understand this extraordinary visual event taking place, but is quite aware that what is occurring is truly beyond his perception (291). For the ceiling "did not really take on these different hues; the colors merely made it somewhat transparent" (291). And it is in this transparency that the reality of the event becomes apparent to the man, for there in his ceiling were "things striving to break through" which "seemed to be hovering above it" (291). In fact, "already one could almost see the outlines of a movement there, an arm was thrust out, a silver sword swung to and fro" (291). This man, isolated in his room, was about to bear witness to an other-worldly event, an event he was certain was intended just for him. "It was meant for me, there was no doubt of that; a vision intended for my liberation was being prepared" (291).

It is this realization that spurs the man to action. In an instant, the man had "sprang up" and quickly flung the table from the middle of the room while also ripping the electric light with its brass fixture from the ceiling, hurling it to the floor. The man overwhelmed by what was about to happen to him, began to prepare the room so "that which was striving to appear

could drop down unhindered on the carpet and announce to me whatever it had to announce” (291). Having prepared the room for his transcendent visitor, the man bears witness as “the ceiling did in fact break open,” and “an angel in bluish-violet robes girt with gold cords sank slowly down on great white silken-shining wings” (291-92). It is at this moment that Kafka’s story takes its most fascinating turn. In a story that has been up until this point increasingly overwhelmed by the fantastic, what occurs next is both entirely fantastic and tragically mundane. In rapt anticipation, the man in the room realizes what is about to occur and prepares himself.

“An angel, then!” I thought; “it has been flying towards me all day and in my disbelief I did not know it. Now it will speak to me,” I lowered my eyes. When I raised them again the angel was still there, it is true, hanging rather far off under the ceiling (which had closed up again), but it was no living angel, only a painted wooden figurehead off the prow of some ship, one of the kind that hangs from the ceiling in sailor’s taverns, nothing more (292).

An event which had possessed so much promise, so much capacity for dramatic transformation, ends in the crashing disappointment of the thoroughly absurd. A story that appeared to be headed for a divine manifestation somehow transformed itself into a comic farce. And yet, the event itself is no less extraordinary. The man is still left with the tragic aftermath of an aborted mystical vision. And it is his reaction to this event that is the most revealing aspect of the story, for this man does not run screaming from his room to bear witness to the epic event. He does not run to his open window and call down to the street to petition passers by to come up and see the incredible remainder of an unrealized divine entreaty. He does not even seem to be the least bit alarmed or surprised. Instead, his only concern is that with the impending darkness of the evening he will be left without the light from the lamp that was previously hanging from the ceiling. His solution to this absence of light provides the story with its decidedly ironic resolution. “I didn’t want to remain in the dark,” the man comments to himself (292). So, noticing that the hilt of the sword in the hand of his wooden angel was “made in such a way as to hold candles and catch the dripping tallow,” the man climbed on a chair and placed a candle into the hilt of the sword now protruding from his ceiling (292). The man “then sat late into the night under the angel’s faint flame” (292).

In a post-Kafka world this short, misplaced narrative might not seem nearly as startling as it should. The twentieth century, in fact, has subsequently been inundated with the ironic fusion of the transcendent with the absurd. Salvador Dali, Samuel Beckett, Federico Fellini, William S. Burroughs, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and David Lynch (et al.) have all expressed the fundamental breach within our modern world between what we experience and what stands as the foundation for our experience. None, though, were as quintessentially succinct or lucid in their portrayal of the essential struggle for the modern Western individual to (re)locate the connection between the transcendent and mundane severed by the modern intellectual enterprise. At a time when Kafka faced some of the most mundane choices in his life—whether or not to marry, whether or not to quit a job, whether or not to fight in a war—the vision that comes to him is the story of a man confronted by an impotent God. It is a story possessing all the trappings of a divine revelation and none of the payoff.

What is quite remarkable about Kafka's story of the ceiling angel is the marvelous juxtaposition of certain traditional mystical tropes with the sense of ironic detachment that has come to define our post-traditional world. Spatially, this divine messenger descends toward the man in the story who has not only lowered himself before the emerging angel, but has for the first time (in the narrative) presented himself in a state of quiet contemplation as opposed to the frantic search that had originally characterized his presence in the room. The description of the emerging transcendence also carries with it the distinct echoes of Judeo-Christian mystical tradition. The emphasis on the ineffable quality of the light (or colors) flowing like waves across the ceiling highlight an important feature of the indescribable divine radiance that may be experienced but never authentically expressed. The descriptions of this supersensory experience in Kafka's story highlight the tension between the visible and invisible God that is an essential feature of the mystical tradition. In this story we also have a wonderfully traditional angel, brandishing a sword and clothed in flowing robes that are girt with golden cords. Is this one of the angels that protects the seven gates of heaven come directly to this world to confront this man? Or is it simply an amalgamation of all the angelic references that had found their way through the ages to this one? Either way, the presence of this angel and the transcendent radiance upon which it is born, signify Kafka's effort (intentional or otherwise) to play with a very particular and traditional notion of what revelation means, and what transcendence means.

The absence of certain traditional mystical features in this story is equally telling. In this story there is no “fear and trembling” and no full-formed supplication by the man in the presence of the transcendent. This man does not bow down in abject fear and humility. Nor does he respond to the presence of this angel in hopeful servitude, awaiting some pre-fashioned divine instruction or knowledge. There is no chance this man will utter, “Here I am.” The almost comic nonchalance by which this man responds to the failure of the divine message indicates a profound tension between expectation and fulfillment that tends to dominate our modern notions of transcendence and revelation. While the reader might expect the angel to speak to the man, as would logically follow from the traditional telling of such a tale, the fact that the angel never communicates to the man, while perhaps startling, is also a perfectly reasonable result given our modern expectations of such traditional attitudes regarding the transcendent. Tradition might tell us that this story is headed toward fulfillment, but our modern expectations about the possibility of such an encounter (about revelation) make its failure not unsurprising, and darkly comic. The man, in fact, refuses to sit there in the darkness or even to accept the wooden angel’s presence as entirely useless. Instead, he sits there under the light from a flame that he produced. A man-made light supported by an artificial angel.

The Distance of God in a Post-Traditional World

In nearly the entire Kafka oeuvre the distance between the transcendent and the mundane plays a central role. Max Brod, Kafka’s long-time friend and literary executor, tells us in his biography of Kafka that “no one was so burningly conscious of the ‘distance from God’ as he was” (Brod 1995: 180). And nowhere in the entire collection of Kafka’s works is this distance so dramatically represented than in his story of the “Ceiling Angel.” In this story, Kafka presents to us the space between God and humanity that has come to define our age. In Kafka, the distance between the self and God has produced a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the self and all those measures of the self that had previously allowed for the luxury of a personal God. In Kafka, it is not just the space between God and humanity that dominates, but also the space between tradition and humanity, truth and humanity, and the self and all other humanity. Kafka’s literary enterprise is a nearly exhaustive effort to represent the space between the self and all that exists outside the self and defines the self. It is this abyss that not only defines

Kafka's work, it also defines the post-traditional human condition. As such, in Kafka we can locate what Gershom Scholem (the patriarchal scholar of Jewish mysticism) described as the expression of the space "between religion and nihilism" (Scholem 1973: 271).

In his story of the "Ceiling Angel," Kafka presents us with an intimate view of a post-traditional world in which faith and revelation are, at best, suspect endeavors. In Kafka's world, God may very well still attempt to act but that does not mean these actions will have any affect on us. Shorn free from those structures that allowed us to not only imagine the word of God, but to actually hear and experience the word of God, we are left with the presence of the revelation of God but not its power. Instead, the word of God hangs helplessly from the ceilings of our bedrooms. We must find our own candle and attach it if we wish it to shed any light upon our lonely existence. In a letter to his dear friend Walter Benjamin, Scholem explains Kafka's view of revelation: "Kafka's world is the world of revelation, but of revelation seen of course from that perspective in which it is returned to its own nothingness" (Scholem 1992: 126). For Scholem, the most distinguishable feature of revelation for Kafka is its "*nonfulfillability*" (126). It is not the absence of revelation that characterizes Kafka's world, but the very fact for him that it cannot be fulfilled. As a result, we are left with the overwhelming pressure of what to do with it now, of what to do with its impotence. We are left with the question of what to do with God now, of how to respond to God's (apparent) impotence.

Scholem's letter to Benjamin was part of an extensive epistolary relationship the two shared throughout most of the 1930s, just as the initial international impact of Kafka's work was beginning to take affect—and just as the true mission of Hitler was beginning to be realized in Europe, especially among European Jews.² Central to the correspondence of these two men at this time were the writings of Kafka. In Kafka, both Benjamin and Scholem found a figure whose writings not only represented the German-Jewish tradition of modernity, but someone whose work spoke to the essential struggles of the modern world. For Scholem, Kafka represented the latest link in a long chain of tradition. His was the voice that connected their world to the past. For Benjamin, though, Kafka represented the rupture of tradition. His was the voice that bespoke the fundamental break between their world and all that preceded it. Kafka's voice expressed the fracture between modernity and tradition. In fact, in direct response to Scholem's letter written in July 1934, Benjamin penned a series of replies

many of which dealt directly with Scholem's assertions concerning Kafka's understanding of revelation in the modern world. For Benjamin, Kafka's work illuminated an historical crisis which their world was facing. Theirs was a world beset by "the sickness of tradition" (225). As Benjamin saw it, Kafka's attempts to concretize the word of revelation in his writing were by their very failure historical evidence of an age where failure is all we have left. Kafka's efforts to engage the revelation of tradition were made by an individual standing very much on the outside of tradition. According to Benjamin, it was Kafka who "eavesdropped on tradition" (224) because he was forced to this position by a world in which the transcendent power of tradition had been drained dry.

If Scholem saw Kafka's world as the "world of revelation" kept fresh by a "living stream of authentic mysticism," (Scholem 1954: 43) then Benjamin saw Kafka's world as one in which that stream had dried up. Left now were the ghostly specters of revelation warning us of our impending doom.

Kafka's world, frequently so serene and so dense with angels, is the exact complement of his epoch, an epoch that is preparing itself to annihilate the inhabitants of this planet on a massive scale. The experience that corresponds to that of Kafka as a private individual will probably first become accessible to the masses at such time as they are about to be annihilated (Scholem 1992: 224).

These words were written June 12, 1938, by a man who in two short years would take his own life rather than surrender it to the Nazis. What Benjamin saw in his world, and what he saw expressed so forcefully in the writings of Kafka, was a world on the very edge of tradition. All those forces of the Western tradition had converged in the early twentieth century to produce a world violently tearing itself asunder. And for Benjamin, the literary expression of this tragic self-implosion was found in Kafka. On this border between religion and nihilism the world produced nothing but failure, was able to recognize nothing but failure, was headed toward inevitable failure. The historical trajectory of this failure was not lost on Benjamin, a man whose Marxist perspective is well documented.

The Economy of Failure

The Kafka oeuvre is replete with failure: big failures and little failures,

failures of character and failures of action, failures of communication and failures to communicate, failures to start, failures to act, and failures to finish. Even the successes found in Kafka's stories are only temporarily masquerading as such. They too are only failures in disguise. Failure in Kafka's fiction is not so much a thematic device as it is a diagnosis of the human condition. To live in this world means to fail. To be human means to fail. To be the least bit self-reflective is to reflect upon the inadequacy and fundamental insufficiency of being human. The resounding prevalence of failure within Kafka's stories indicates a concerted effort by an author to depict the naked existential condition of the individual face-to-face with the possibility of the self. It is a sustained meditation on the finite human being blessed (or cursed) with the power to conceive of the infinite. It is a meditation on the particular in tension with the absolute. Kafka's work, as Benjamin so aptly pointed out, represents the "purity and beauty of failure" (Benjamin 1968: 145). And in so doing, the Kafka corpus presents a thorough investigation of the cause, nature, and possibility of failure.

The emphasis on failure by Kafka does not merely apply to his fictional writings. It is an idea sown through the entire Kafka *Nachlass*. In both the public and private writings of Kafka we see a man overwhelmed by his own failures—both personally and artistically. Kafka understood his writing as a vocation. His need to write was not merely to satisfy a desire to express the self, but was a compulsion to express in some fashion the glimpse into the divine truth that he had been granted. Kafka quite literally understood (and explained) his need to write as fundamental to his very being, and to his very survival. As such, his continuous failure to fully capture or express this inward truth was a constant source of tension and anxiety. Kafka was perpetually unsatisfied with his work. He never truly felt that it managed to convey all that he had intended. The result was not only the constant struggle within his own life to write, but also his notorious dissatisfaction with his writing. Kafka was forever upset with himself over his lack of literary production. He struggled his entire adult life to find the proper time and place in which to explore his vocation. The result was long unproductive stretches in his life when little or nothing was written. Kafka also frequently (if not always) failed in his writing. Numerous stories within the collected works were rewritten and re-edited multiple times. And a surprising percentage of the overall body of works remains unfinished, including all three novels. As a result, Kafka understood himself both to have failed to write and to have failed in writing.

In failure, Kafka identifies that very aspect of humanity that marks our finitude—that marks what we are not. Because we are human we fail. And in our failure we locate the very limit of our humanity. And consequently, failure is also that which identifies the very possibility of the self. It is this tension between what we are and what we can conceive that flows throughout the whole of Kafka. In this way, by exploring the many facets, effects, and causes of failure Kafka is seeking to probe the boundaries of the human condition, to locate that aspect of life which most compels us to accept our humanity and our finitude. As Benjamin explains, “There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure” (145).

In his biography of Kafka, Pietro Citati depicts the middle months of 1914 as a time of religious awakening for Kafka. For Citati, the story of the “Ceiling Angel” stands as an almost literal recording of God’s arrival into the world (and life) of Kafka.

Thus God descended into his life, suddenly, without warning, like the angel with the large white wings and the brandished sword. But was it truly God? Or only his counterfeit, his shadow, a wooden figurehead? Whatever he might think, Kafka lived for the rest of his life beneath the light of this fearful visitor (Citati 1990: 125-26).

According to Citati, Kafka took this incomplete theophany and transformed it “into the most grandiose and complex theological system in the modern world” (125). Kafka’s entire literary project, henceforth, became the effort of “faith seeking understanding.” But did Kafka really “find” God in the middle of 1914? Or did he simply discover his position in relation to the Divine? What was “revealed” to Kafka in 1914 was the thoroughly transcendent nature of God. It was the absolute otherness of the Divine. It was the unbridgeable chasm between him and all that he was measured by, between him and all that defined him. In 1914, Franz Kafka finally realized that failure was not simply a fact of his life, but a fundamental aspect of the human condition. God is not the Father. God is the unseeable, unknowable force that defines our world, but whose presence has somehow been removed from our world. God is that whose very otherness circumscribes our existence, and yet his apparent absence has left us thoroughly incapable of finding our way across that imposing abyss that separates us from the Divine.³

In the writings of Kafka, what we find is a man thoroughly committed to the essential task of humanity, the task to somehow transcend our finite,

mundane, human natures. It is this essential (and impossible) task that has been the project of humanity since the very beginning. Since Eden, since Babel, since Moriah, since Sinai, humanity has sought to surpass those very limits that define us and to achieve an absolute and authentic relationship with the Wholly Other. Since the time of Adam and Eve, the time of Abraham, and the time of Moses humanity has sought to bridge the gap between our humanity and the divinity which we conceive of as the ultimate expression of our possibility. This quest for authenticity, this quest for truth is fundamental to the very process of being human. And our failure in this task is equally fundamental.

What Franz Kafka discovered in the middle months of 1914 was a life and a world very much on the edge of existence. It was a location where Kafka was never able to stay very long, but it was a place that he would come back to time and again. In these existential struggles, Kafka would transform his inner chaos into some of the most beguiling and revealing literature composed in the twentieth century. In his quest to document the liminal sphere that exists between the mundane and the transcendent, Kafka presented to our world not only its most authentic expression of the modern aesthetic, but also a detailed account of the crisis of identity that has come to define our existence in a post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic world. Kafka's story of the "Ceiling Angel" is a completely present-centered story. It is the story of an individual trapped in and by the present. The man in this story is completely incapable of bridging the very moment of his existence. He is unable to connect his present to a past, to an understanding of the past given to him by a tradition. And he is unable to connect his present to a future, to an understanding of the future given to him by a tradition.

In a present-centered existence, revelation cannot occur. Revelation cannot occur because it transcends the present. Revelation is, by its very nature, a complete transcendence of time which articulates for us the full expression of time. Revelation is what allows us to understand that our present is in fact an essential component of the long interwoven fabric of time. Revelation cannot occur in a time where there is no connection to the past and where there is no vision of the future. In a world where all meaningful connections to tradition have been severed, where all meaning, all truth, and all understanding are focused solely on the present, our connection to the transcendent has been thoroughly impaired. In a world where we have become consumed by the now, it is nearly impossible to connect with what stands outside of the now, with what exists as the very foundation of the

now.⁴ In a post-traditional world those fundamental expressions of tradition—narrative, history, and religion—have become thoroughly present-centered expressions. What were once meaningful explorations of our relationship to our past and our future have instead become static presentations of singularity, particularity, and subjectivity. The result is a world where revelation is futile, where *re*-presentation is futile. The result is a world where all we have left is expression, where all we have left is presentation. This is what lies at the heart of the modernist aesthetic, where all that matters is the artist and his or her expression.⁵ It is a view of meaning and truth that disengages itself from the flow of time and situates the present as the singular, impregnable bastion of meaning and truth. It is a place on the edge of tradition where angels fear to tread.

Notes

¹ In a letter dating from 1940, Grete Bloch claimed to have given birth to Kafka's son in 1915, who then died seven years later. Absolutely no evidence of Kafka's paternity has been discovered, and circumstantial evidence indicates rather resoundingly that no child was conceived or birthed. Still, Grete's claim does point to a certain perceived intimacy that is evidenced by Kafka's letters to her. If nothing else, Kafka seemed to find someone to write to in early 1914, and someone who would respond. In writing to Grete, he was able to satisfy a craving for some form of intimacy that had disappeared with his estrangement from Felice. And, as was the case with Felice, it was an intimacy achieved through the safety and distance of letters. For a more thorough discussion of Kafka's purported paternity, see Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason* 304-06, or Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003) 108-09.

² There is a palpable sense in the correspondence between Scholem and Benjamin that both men were thoroughly aware of not only what was happening to the Jews living under Hitler's reign, but also of the truly epic and cataclysmic nature of the Nazi designs for all European Jews, see Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* 131-32, 136-38, 166-74, 232-39, 245-48, and 254-57.

³ For an interesting comparison of Kafka's evolving relationship to the Divine, especially with regard to his father, note the difference between *Das Urteil*, written in September 1912, and *Der Prozess*, written in late 1914. These two stories provide a distinctly different relationship between the individual and the incomprehensible authority that rules over the individual. The father/god is present in *Das Urteil*, but in *Der Prozess* the father/god is resoundingly absent. Yet, in both stories the divine law is capricious, arbitrary, and absurd.

⁴ George Steiner rightly characterizes this present-centeredness as a product of the “age of journalism” in which we now live. He describes this age thusly, “The genius of this age is that of journalism. Journalism throngs every rift and cranny of our consciousness. It does so because the press and media are far more than a technical instrument and commercial enterprise. The root-phenomenology of the journalistic is, in a sense, metaphysical. It articulates an epistemology and ethics of spurious temporality. Journalistic presentation generates a temporality of equivalent instantaneity. All things are more or less of equal import; all are only daily. Correspondingly, the content, the possible significance of the material which journalism communicates, is “remaindered” the day after. The journalistic vision sharpens to the point of maximum impact every event, every individual and social configuration; but the honing is uniform. Political enormity and the circus, the leaps of science and those of the athlete, apocalypse and indigestion, are given the same edge. Paradoxically, this monotone of graphic urgency anesthetizes. The utmost beauty or terror are shredded at close of day. We are made whole again, and expectant, in time for the morning edition” (Steiner, *Real Presences* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989] 26-27).

⁵ For an explanation of the modernist aesthetic, especially as it relates to the work of Kafka, see Walter Sokel, “Kafka and Modernism” in *Approaches to Teaching Kafka's Short Fiction*, ed. Richard T. Gray (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1995) 21-34.

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