Theodor Adorno’s “Notes on Kafka”: The “Blind Residue” of Ideology in Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*

Theodor Adorno, in “Notes on Kafka” (*Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka*), writes, “The hermetic principle [of Kafka’s work] has among others, the function of a protective measure: it keeps out the onrushing delusion, which would mean, however, its own collectivization. The work that shatters individuation will at no point want to be imitated…such inimitability also affects the situation of the critic. Confronted by Kafka his position is no more enviable than that of the disciple” (“Notes” 254). The position of the critic commenting on Franz Kafka’s work is indeed a perilous one. But, surely, a “hermetic principle” operates within Adorno’s commentary as well. His claims, rendered in maddeningly dense prose, refuse straightforward conceptualization. Adorno withholds understanding from the indifferent and perfunctory reader. He demands effort in the interpretation of art.

I would like to expound “Notes on Kafka,” first, by exploring aspects of Adorno’s epistemology and aesthetic theory, and second, by presenting textual evidence relevant to his reading of *The Trial*. In particular, I want to focus on how Adorno’s rejection of Enlightenment epistemology—i.e., the rejection of instrumental subject/object relations, in favor of the object’s (read: the social’s) priority over the subject—uncovers dimensions of societal critique in Kafka’s fiction.¹ As Adorno argues, Kafka resists oppressive institutions by making their power outrageously explicit. “Kafka’s…mute battle cry against myth,” he writes, “is not to resist” (“Notes” 264). Joseph K., throughout *The Trial*, accordingly fails to assert his autonomy as an
Enlightenment knower. Instead, he is reified by the omnipresent—yet unmappable—power of the Court. As thing, K. is totally permeable to forces outside of himself, forces that he is unable to control or know.

Wary of being marked a “disciple,” I am hesitant to accept certain aspects of Adorno’s reading of *The Trial*, especially his inclination to grant K. awareness of his reified subjectivity. It is too late for K. He cannot be saved. But that is not to say that we, too, are doomed to suffer the same fate. This is the strength of Adorno’s commentary. As he writes, the “power” of Kafka’s art is its “demolition,” for it “tears down the soothing façade to which a repressive reason increasingly conforms”—i.e., absolute sovereignty over one’s subjectivity (“Notes” 252). There is hope in story: its capacity to awaken readers to the fact that they are, to a large extent, socially constituted. We (ourselves) are not completely autonomous, impervious to others. Rather, we are continually invaded and shaped by others, in ways that we can and will never fully comprehend. But neither do we mirror K. as “fortress[es] of myth” (271). For, recognizing that ‘who we are’ is not inevitably ‘who we must be’—that is, natural or necessary—we may attempt to claim personal agency, in short, become human beings.

1.

In order to unpack “Notes on Kafka,” it is important that we briefly touch on the thought paradigm that Adorno opposes: Enlightenment knowing. This paradigm posits time and space as rationally correspondent entities, such that objects (and others) are instrumentally related to subjects. As Philip Weinstein writes in *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, “the emergence of the subject who would know establishes, in pure alienation, the identity of the object as what is to be known” (28; emphasis in the original). In this epistemological model, it is possible (but not inevitable) for the subject to orient herself by cognitively mapping the world
outside of her. Insofar as consciousness can know objects as phenomena—(re)translating the ‘object as it really is’ as accurately as possible into the ‘object as it is seen’—space and time merge to constitute a scene that enables productive human action. Put otherwise, the subject cannot know herself before she attempts to know—or, as we will see, domesticate—the object; mastery of what is outside the subject brings knowledge of what is inside. Thus, subject and object are entered into a relationship that is favorable to epistemological progress.

This paradigm of Enlightenment epistemology functions similarly in realist literature. Realist fiction obtains the reader’s trust by placing characters into literary worlds of “verisimilitude.” Fictional representation, Weinstein claims, “invokes the reader’s growing sense of familiarity with the nonverbal scene being put into words, but not by pretending belief in some ‘imitation of the real’… [but rather through] seemingness itself…allow[ing] realist art to exploit the speculative space of detachment that writing requires (and to which it is in any event condemned) in its intricate relation to the real” (53; emphasis in the original). That is not to say, however, that realism admits to the hermeneutics of its presuppositions. It is evident upon reaching the end of a realist narrative that—all along—the extradiegetic narrator has been cooking the books, crafting the story with the ending in mind, an ending that takes the character (and the reader) somewhere. Positing verbal representation that is bound by rules, realism inserts an intradiegetic character with the ability to domesticate the temporal and spatial conditions of her story-world—in short, come to know the fictional environment around her.

Adorno is intensely skeptical of such Enlightenment thinking. For, insomuch as Enlightenment (or realist) subjects quantify—or “re-present”—the object in terms familiar to reason, the object loses its identity tout court to an identity that incorrectly constructed by human sighting. That is not to say that Enlightenment thinkers did not attempt to separate the
appearance of the object from its truth content; their emphasis on scientific objectivity derived from a desire to close the gap between the object and its perception. Nevertheless, for Adorno, the fact remains that instrumental subject/object relations privilege subjectivity. For “re-presenting the object,” as Weinstein says, “establishes its identity… What one comes to know is painstakingly winnowed of distortion, disinterestedly re-cognizable, finally, in its invariant identity” (64; emphasis in the original). Fixed as known—mapped—the object ceases to be other and instead becomes secondary to human projects.6

As such, Enlightenment distinctions between the ‘object as it really is’ and the ‘object as it appears to human observation’ become irrelevant. If subjects come to know by overcoming the difference of what they do not (or perhaps cannot) know, objects (and even persons) outside subjectivity lose their reality to sameness, i.e., Enlightenment consciousness. “The more [Enlightenment] rationalism reduces objective matters to human dimensions,” Adorno writes, “the more barren and unintelligible become the outlines of the merely existing world which man can never entirely dissolve into subjectivity and from which he has already drained everything familiar” (“Notes,” 268). For Adorno, Enlightenment subjectivity proceeds as if it has incorporated into itself “everything familiar” from the “world.” It turns its non-identity (the ‘object as it is’) into its recurrent identity (the ‘object as it is known’). It converts what it is not into who it already is.

In contrast to Enlightenment possession, grounded in instrumental subject/object relations, Adorno contends that subject and object are not identical but rather non-identical to one another. The object does not exist solely as a means to the subject’s ends -- as “commodity,” for example. On the contrary, the object is visibly wrought by the labor of subjects who produced it; insofar as it is itself constructed, the object de-constructs (in the sense that it re-presents) a
complicated social history of manipulative and alienating ideology. Indeed, objects are marked in a myriad of ways by the norms of the society that created them—in the case of modernity, Western capitalism. Thus, Adorno reconfigures subject/object relations such that the object—or, the social—takes priority over the subject. “Absolute subjectivity,” Adorno writes, “is…subjectless. The self lives solely through transformation into otherness; as the secure residue of the subject which cuts itself off from everything alien, it becomes the blind residue of the world” (“Notes” 263). The subject “becomes the blind residue of the world” when ignorant that she is scripted to coincide with larger ideological discourses,” when unaware that she is permeable to an array of social forces outside of her.

The subject as “blind residue,” however, is not teleologically inevitable. Adorno claims that the subject, through rigorous thinking, may cast aside her ignorance for authentic self-enlightenment, “a demystified grasp upon the object,” as Weinstein puts it—in other words, a greater understanding of how she is marked by the social (Weinstein 116). Through such a re-conceptualization of one’s social environment, Adorno writes, “The self, innermost fortress of myth, is smashed, repudiated as the illusion of mere nature” (“Notes,” 271). Indeed, for Adorno, it is “the task of thought” to unveil (by making explicit) the ideology that impels belief in inalienable and autonomous subjectivity. Contra the Enlightenment subject—who is confirmed as a self by knowledge of what surrounds her—Adorno’s writing is a call for estrangement from familiarity, a call for renewed awareness of who we think we are. In effect, Adorno recommends crisis, that which challenges our unthinking conception of space and time, forcing each of us to search inside and recognize the presence of others.
2.

According to Adorno, it is this Enlightenment operation of ideological sameness—masquerading as autonomous knowing—that drives the form of Kafka’s writing. “What is enclosed in Kafka’s glass ball,” Adorno writes, “is even more monotonous, more coherent and hence more horrible than the system outside, because in absolute subjective space and in absolute subjective time there is no room for anything that might disturb their intrinsic principle” (“Notes” 261). Without traffic between a subject and others—or, conversely, permitting traffic between a subject and only one other—Kafka’s characters in *The Trial* are nothing but the actualization of the same “principle.” As such, they are often strikingly similar to one other: “[A]ll possible demi-creatures step forward in pairs, often marked by the childish and the silly, oscillating between affability and cruelty like savages in children’s books.” “Over and over,” Adorno writes, “Titorelli paints the monotonous genre picture, the heath” (cited in “Notes” 253). Likewise, the girls in Titorelli’s apartment roam indistinguishable from one another in packs, each of “their faces betray[ing] the same mixture of childishness and depravity” (Kafka 142). Like Titorelli’s paintings, the girls are reproductions, copied *a priori* from the Court’s inscrutable master proof.

“Doubles” abound in the *The Trial*, provoking in readers a feeling of constant “déjà vu.” In addition to the paintings and girls, the two warders who arrest K., Willem and Franz, though not completely identical to one another, compliment each other’s words and acts (Kafka 4-9). Later, when K. opens the door to the lumber-room in the Bank, Willem and Franz reappear at the mercy of a man with a rod (84). K. slams the door, only to return the next day to discover that the uniform rules of Enlightenment space/time have collapsed: “*Everything was still the same,* exactly as he had found it on opening the door the previous evening…the Whipper with his rod
and the warders with all their clothes on were still standing there, the candle was burning on the shelf” (89; my emphasis). And, as the doorkeeper, in the prison chaplain’s parable, says to the man wishing entry into the Law, “I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. And the sight of the third man is already more than even I can stand” (213). Although the doorkeepers differ in strength, they are similar in occupation, an infinite number of men guarding an infinite series of doors. More, the doorkeepers may even resemble each other at their very core, enough so that the “lowest doorkeeper” must look away (dizzied, perhaps, by his countless duplicity) after sighting only two others. Indistinguishable from each other, Kafka’s subjects are not subjects but objects, the “blind residue” of ideology. Like the Assistant Manager at the Bank, whose facial wrinkles “speak of [social] power rather than old age,” characters in *The Trial* are molded by the ubiquitous influence of the Court (140).

Like the others, K., too, is reified by the Court, lacks awareness of its ideology. Unlike the Enlightenment subject—who can know her interior by mapping outside objects—K. does not know that he is yet another “monotonous” result of the Court’s “blind force,” a “product of [its] disguised domination” (“Notes” 260). Insomuch as he is shaped by the Court’s unlocatable force, K.’s subjectivity irrupts in a myriad of directions. His speech-acts and gestures are impervious to totalizing thought, that is, cannot be narrated into a single project or a set of motivations. One moment, K. consults his uncle, his lawyer, and a Clerk of the Court about his case; the next, K. makes love to Leni, inexplicably abandoning the Clerk’s help and leaving his uncle “to wait…in the rain for hours” (Kafka 112). K.’s projects do not point back toward his own autonomous selfhood. He points elsewhere, i.e., toward the Court, an entity that is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere.
No one knows for sure where the Court’s authority comes from, how it is organized, why it rules as it does. Yet, as Titorelli points out, the Court is present everywhere, even in his studio: “There are Law Court offices in every attic, why should this be an exception?” (164). For Titorelli, there is no way for K. to know how the Court will rule, nor is there a means to completely escape its grasp: “There are three possibilities, that is, definite acquittal, ostensible acquittal, and indefinite postponement. Definite acquittal is, of course, the best, but…[a]s far as I know, there is no single person who could influence the verdict of definite acquittal” (152). On the diegetic level, though not knowable to it, to be reified is to be confronted with both the uncertainty and the inevitability of the Court’s judgment. This is the condition of being the accused. As the prison chaplain tells K., “It is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary” (220). Doubled by others in ways beyond his comprehension—the Assistant Manager at work, Block at the lawyer’s—K. becomes a dispensable appendage in the larger bureaucracy of the Court. The Court’s “verdict” is to absorb K. into an ideology of sameness. As it created him, it will ultimately destroy him.

If, as we have seen, “[Kafka] follows that tradition of enlightenment which reaches from the Homeric myth to Hegel and Marx”—insomuch as Kafka’s fiction makes explicit what Adorno believes to be the hidden truth underpinning autonomy, namely homogeny—the result is imminent critique of Enlightenment subjectivity (“Notes” 270). Whereas Homer constructs one of the greatest realist worlds—as Odysseus, the Enlightenment knower, hurdles obstacle after obstacle to make it back home—Kafka places K. in one of the greatest anti-realisms. K. goes nowhere, learns nothing. That is not to say, however, that K. simply “accept[s],” as the prison chaplain puts it, what is “necessary.” At one point, impatient with the lawyer’s progress, K. decides to dismiss his services. “[I]f he were to achieve anything,” K. thinks to himself, “it was
essential that he should banish from his mind once and for all the idea of possible guilt. There was no such guilt. This legal action was nothing more than a business deal such as he had often concluded to the advantage of the Bank, a deal within which, as always happened, lurked various dangers which must simply be *obviated*” (Kafka 127; my emphasis). Here, it is as if K. sees in himself the chance to be an Odysseus, to “obviate” by force of will the “dangers” external to his being. K. wishes to approach his case like a “business deal”: objectively (not only in the rational but the material sense, as well). True to Enlightenment subject/object relations, K. strives to master objects outside himself in order to attain cognitive purchase on what is inside, in short, to try to take control of his destiny.

Yet, as Adorno makes clear, K.’s Enlightenment efforts only make him more culpable in front of the Court: “The heroes of the *Trial* and the *Castle* become guilty not through their guilt—they have none—but because they try to get justice on their side” (“Notes” 270). K. deludes himself, but not necessarily because he believes himself free to act on his own behalf (remember, for Adorno, self-enlightenment is not impossible). Rather, K. deludes himself because he believes that reason yields progress—that, in Kafka’s literary world, space and time proceed uniformly and can be domesticated. In these moments of delusion, K. trusts in the Enlightenment premises of “trial.” As Weinstein defines it, “[a] world with laws…presupposes a knowable past as orientation for present enterprises: a record of adjudicated former experiences that allows the present to be clarified and the future to be pursued” (Weinstein 139). In a trial, a jury rationally arbitrates between competing evidence of past events, searching for a true narrative, one that explains how current circumstances came to be. Indeed, K. presupposes that such a jury exists. During his preliminary “interrogation,” K. gives a lengthy oration accusing the Court of being corrupt, as if he were a lawyer speaking to an impartial jury: “[T]here can be no
doubt that behind all the actions of this court of justice, that is to say in my case, behind my arrest and today’s interrogation, there is a great organization at work…And the significance of this great organization, gentlemen? It consists in this, that innocent persons are accused of guilt, and senseless proceedings are put in motion against them” (Kafka 45-6). K. proceeds as if he can “dominate the meeting,” as if he were in a novel where rational discourse had intersubjective traction—that made cognitive purchase in the mind of the jury and thus epistemological progress toward justice (45).

But this illusion of judicial sincerity soon disappears when K.’s proceedings are “interrupted by a shriek from the end of the hall; he peered from beneath his hand to see what was happening, for the reek of the room and the dim light together made a whitish dazzle of fog” (Kafka 46). In the crowd (i.e., jury), in the back of the room’s murky confines (i.e., courtroom), a man makes love to the washerwoman. There will be no rational adjudication of K.’s case on this day, at least in terms set forth by Enlightenment epistemology. Regardless of how hard K. tries to make Homeric progress, he will not succeed. Reified, he is a pawn moved by a hand that is not his own.10 In sum, K. is “too far gone to attend to himself,” the “blind residue” of the Court’s ideology (Kafka 68). And, as residue, he is swept away. In the novel’s last pages, the Court’s executioners take K. to a rock-filled “quarry,” where (subject-as-social) matter—as inanimate object—is broken apart (227). He is unable to summon a call for help, an officer of the law passes him by, for K. is overwhelmed with the “futility of resistance.” He does not acquiesce—as, perhaps, an Enlightenment knower might if he failed by his own accord. Rather, K. is handed over to a de-humanizing thought: “Into his mind came a recollection of flies struggling away from the flypaper till their little legs were torn off” (225; my emphasis). K. submits to the
Court’s authority; the Court carries him lifeless, like a sack of gravel (225). He dies “like a dog,” obedient to the last (229).

K. is lost. We cannot save him. But that does not necessarily mean that we, too, are lost. By presenting K.’s reified predicament for the eyes of the extradiegetic reader, Kafka writes “the trial of the trial…describ[ing] the court which sits in judgment over men in order to convict law itself” (“Notes” 268). Through story, Kafka fights a struggle for our awareness, provokes us to question the shaping force of ideology, prods “power…to acknowledge itself as that which it is” (270).11 “If there is hope in Kafka’s artwork,” Adorno writes, it is “in the capacity to stand up to the worst by making it into language” (254). For Kafka, the future, while scripted, remains unrealized. It is our responsibility to (un)know it, re-write it, live it otherwise.
Works Cited


Notes

1 My defense of Adorno’s reading of Kafka, that his fiction encompasses societal critique, opposes Georg Lukács’s reading of Kafka (and modernism in general) in “The Ideology of Modernism.” For Lukács, modernism is inextricable from the “doctrine of eternal incognito,” or the idea “that a man’s external deeds are no guide to his motives”—i.e., that individual consciousness is ultimately incommensurable with the objective world (27). Lukács writes that, following Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard, modernist literature cuts all ties between the subject and her social “environment.” As such, Lukács argues that modernism’s “protest” against modernity “lack[s]…definition” because of its “flight into psychopathology… [I]ts rejection of reality is wholesale and summary, containing no concrete criticism. It is a gesture, moreover, that is destined to lead nowhere; it is an escape into nothingness. Thus the propagators of this ideology are mistaken in thinking that such a protest could ever be fruitful in literature. In any protest against particular social conditions, these conditions themselves must have the central place…based on a concrete terminus ad quem: the establishment of a new order” (29).

2 At times, Adorno seems to grant Joseph K. an awareness of his reified subjectivity: “Kafka seeks salvation in the incorporation of the powers of the adversary. The subject seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself. It prepares to complete the fate which befell it. ‘For the last time, psychology’—Kafka’s figures are instructed to leave their psyches at the door, at a moment of the social struggle in which the sole chance of the bourgeois individual lies in the negation of his own composition, as well as of the class situation which has condemned him to be what he is” (“Notes” 270). As we shall see, I claim the contrary, namely that K. is never fully aware of his interior’s susceptibility to the shaping power of social ideology (i.e., the Court).

3 Cf. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: ‘The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and that is the same principle by which spirit organized the world’ ” (cited in Weinstein 256-7).

4 French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas refers to this process of translating the object (as it is) into phenomena (as it is seen) as an “adequation between thought and what it thinks” (cited in Weinstein 29). For Levinas, such acts of “adequation” attempt to homogenize—“appropriate” and “grasp”—what is “other” in the object and quantify it as what is comprehensible and the same: “the known is understood and so appropriated by knowledge, and as it were freed of its otherness” (“Ethics as First Philosophy” 76, emphasis in the original).

5 Inner orientation of the subject, however, is possible only after she has sufficiently questioned the cognitive map currently at hand. Vis-à-vis Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes and his notion of universal doubt, one cannot orient oneself toward knowing until one has first gone through the process of total unknowing.

6 With similar theoretical intent, Adorno and Max Horkheimer write in Dialectic of Enlightenment, “In advance, the Enlightenment recognizes as being and occurrence only what can be apprehended in its unity: its ideal is the system…The multiplicity of forms is reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter” (cited in Weinstein 268; my emphasis).

7 Of course, Adorno’s Marxist inflection of the object is not self-evident. For Adorno, the “unlimited power” of capitalist ideology—that Kafka’s art unmasks—is in its ability to make itself felt as necessary. As Adorno writes, “To this power, that of the raging patriarch, Benjamin gave the name ‘parasitic’: it lives off the life it oppresses. But characteristically, the parasitic moment is displaced…Even the fact that the accused bank clerk, Josef K., being preoccupied with his trial, cannot do his job properly, is recorded…The displacement is modeled on the ideological habit of glorifying the reproduction of life as an act of grace on behalf of those who dispose over the means of production, those who ‘provide’ work” (“Notes” 256).

8 Cf. Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: “ ‘Shudder [the shock of the modernist aesthetic experience] is radically opposed to the conventional idea of experience, provides no particular satisfaction for the I, which, shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude’ ” (cited in Weinstein 116-7).

9 The girls even seem to speak collective as one voice, as when they beg Titorelli to let them into his studio: “‘Titorelli, can we come in now?’ ‘No,’ replied the painter. ‘Not even me?’ the voice asked again. ‘Not even you,’ said the painter” (Kafka 144).

10 The question then becomes: Is K. willfully ignorant of the reality around him? On seeing the Whipper the second day, “K. slammed the door shut and then beat on it with his fists, as if that would shut it more
completely” (Kafka 89). If the Whipper’s sameness testifies to the ideological sameness of Kafka’s literary world, then does K.’s wish to block it testify to his will to ignorance?

11 Cf. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “Even art-works that incorruptibly refuse celebration and consolation do not wipe out radiance, and the greater their success, the more they gain it. Today, this luster devolves precisely upon works that are inconsolable” (cited in Weinstein 106).