

The Power of Madness: A Foucauldian Reading of Kafka's *The Castle* and Other Works

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis examines madness both as a social construct and as a revolt against power in the works of Franz Kafka by applying the thought of Michel Foucault, with emphasis on his *History of Madness* (1961) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in order to analyze the sociopolitical dimensions of madness in Kafka's writing (with emphasis on *The Castle* [1930]). In most of Kafka's stories, the protagonist is isolated, either because he is markedly "different" and does not make sense to the world in which he lives (Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* [1915], the hunger artist in "A Hunger Artist" [1922]) or because he is relatively reasonable or "normal" (like us) and is operating within a nonsensical world (Josef K. in *The Trial* [1925], K. in *The Castle*). Because he does not fit within his episteme (the finite set of ideas which constitute knowledge for a specific culture at a specific period in time), he is a madman, a nuisance to the culture that must either be corrected or removed. Red Peter, from Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" (1917), is an example of a madman "corrected" through discipline. An ape captured by a hunting expedition, Peter learns to mimic mankind, acquiring speech and rising to the "cultural level of an average European" so that he can escape his cage (183). The Hunger Artist of Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," in contrast, locks himself in a cage and insists on making no sense to anyone. The latter character is essentially the negative of the former, and the rationales of both can be helpfully explained using the works of Foucault, which is what I have tried to do in the second chapter. That chapter, in part, serves as a prelude to the third chapter, an analysis of *The Castle* via Foucault that delves more deeply into Foucauldian concepts and foci including panopticism, bureaucratic structures of power, and the reversibility of the reason-madness relationship, through the character K. and his struggle with the Castle.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Franz Kafka's writings can make for painful reading. His works have a reputation for being both absurd and depressing. Kafka's protagonists stand alone, "against a whole world of non-understanding" (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 250), and are deftly defeated; they clash with the empty rationale of their world but leave no positive marks to speak of. It is a perfectly natural response, after reading a Kafka story, to ask: "What is the point in all this?" Kafka was certainly no optimist, but neither was he a misanthrope nor a cynic; in fact, in most respects, Kafka was a successful, well-adjusted person. Why did he write in such an unsettling style? Could it be that Kafka was actively creating *nonsense*? Kafka had an uncanny ability to sense nonsense, to represent it, and to make it felt; and yet his stories leave the reader with the impression that she has encountered something profoundly wise. These stories demonstrate that, often, the most effective means for arriving at wisdom is through the exploration of unreason.

Philosopher and historian Michel Foucault posits as much in his *History of Madness* (1961):¹ "the wisdom of nature is so profound that it manages to use madness as another path for reason, making it a short-cut to wisdom [. . .]" (177). This line of thinking suddenly makes Kafka's absurd universe useful, if not especially hopeful. In most of Kafka's stories, the protagonist is very isolated, either because he is markedly "different" and does not make sense to the world in which he lives (Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* [1915], the hunger artist in "A Hunger Artist" [1922]) or because he is relatively reasonable or "normal" (like us) and is operating within a nonsensical world

¹ *History of Madness*, in its original French edition (1961), was titled *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique (Madness and Unreason: History of Madness in the Classical Age)*. The first English translation was of an abridged version titled *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1964). *History of Madness* is the English translation of the original, unabridged French text. This will be the text that I use.

(Josef K. in *The Trial* [1925], K. in *The Castle* [1930]). Regardless of whether these fictional worlds appear reasonable to the reader, it is indisputable that the characters do not fit adequately within them. The incompatibility of each character's thought with the episteme (the finite set of ideas which constitute knowledge for a specific culture at a specific period in time) of his world and era arguably makes him insane, or, as Foucault would call him, "mad."

A Foucauldian understanding of madness helps to illuminate Kafka's case (as this thesis will demonstrate, with a specific focus on *The Castle*, Kafka's final, uncompleted, and arguably most perplexing work). One of Foucault's primary concerns was humanity's relationship with power. Two of his early works, *History of Madness* and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), are concerned with the regulation of human behavior and thought through various mechanisms of power-knowledge. The former deals with the social construction of madness. The madman, in a Foucauldian sense, is a person who either cannot or will not conform to the order of the society in which he lives. Though the meaning and shape of madness have changed as societal priorities have changed, madness has always been, fundamentally, a resistance to the order of things.

Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power have been applied thoroughly both to Kafka's *The Trial* and "In the Penal Colony" (1919) (Curtis). Panopticism and surveillance have been explored both in *The Trial* (Bogaerts, Dungey, Shah) and in *The Castle* (Corbella), and volumes have been written about the bureaucratic absurdity that permeates much of Kafka's work (McDaniel, Warner). But there is no, insofar as I

know,² explicitly Foucauldian analysis of madness in Kafka's *Castle*. For whatever reason, Foucault's *History of Madness* tends to be overlooked when his thought is applied to Kafka. This is odd, seeing as Kafka's writing is notable for blurring the line between reason and unreason. *Discipline and Punish* applies neatly to *The Trial*, but the novel's twin, *The Castle*, is more nebulous and difficult to pigeonhole. *Discipline and Punish* still applies, but it cannot account for much of the novel's confusion. Like Foucault's concept of madness, which he developed over the course of *History of Madness*, *The Castle* has a "confused, distant, almost imperceptible outline" (*History of Madness* 180). With its dense, labyrinthine discourse, *Madness* lends itself to *The Castle*.

This thesis will therefore be a healthy addition to the already existing scholarship on the Foucault-Kafka connection. Moreover, it will provide a sociopolitical perspective on madness in Kafka's writing to counter the (arguably overdone) psychoanalyses (Neider) and religious-allegorical interpretations (Mann, Brod) that have traditionally been applied.

Writing was Kafka's means for resisting the structures that were determining the course of his life and the pressures that were guiding him along that course; every Kafka story is, at its root, a depiction of resistance. When reading Kafka, we are infuriated by the main character's struggle (or lack thereof) against the persistent illogic of his world, as when Josef K. struggles hopelessly to defend himself against a law he cannot know. When Gregor Samsa finds himself transformed into a giant insect, we are angered by his cruel treatment at the hands of his family. Similarly, when the eponymous character of "A Hunger Artist" starves himself to death, we, in spite of his apparent madness, cannot

² Admittedly, my research will be limited to texts either written in or translated to the English language. Obviously, this will exclude a great deal of German-language writing on Kafka and French-language writing on Foucault.

help but sympathize. Kafka's literary worlds are, at best, indifferent to and, at worst, persecutory of their protagonists. Naturally, we side with the protagonists (or, at the very least, *against* their bleak worlds), even if there is no hope in resistance; the cruelty of these worlds insists that they be resisted.

In *Aphorism*³ 62, Kafka wrote that "The fact that the only world is a constructed world takes away hope and gives us certainty," meaning that the power imbedded in institutions and bureaucracies nullifies the possibility of true freedom by limiting the breadth of our movement (62). This aphorism could be rephrased as, "The certainty of constructs eliminates both the possibility and the need for hope." Passages like this have established Kafka's reputation as a paranoid pessimist. Yet Kafka made a point of writing in spite of fealty to employers, friends, and family. This begs the question: how could a man without hope go on writing in spite of almost universal indifference to his work and obstructions at every turn? For Kafka, the only hope, if there was any at all, was in writing: writing as resistance, in defiance of the order of things.

It is no disproof of one's presentiment of an ultimate liberation if the next day one's imprisonment continues on unchanged, or is even made straiter, or if it is even expressly stated that it will never end. All this can rather be the necessary preliminary to an ultimate liberation. (*The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923* 193)⁴

³ *The Zürau Aphorisms* (first published in 1931) consist of 109 aphorisms, parables, and literary sketches Kafka composed while convalescing in the village of Zürau with his sister Ottla. He had just experienced the first symptoms of the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him (Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight* 186-221). The number in the Aphorism citation refers to the number of the aphorism, not the page on which the aphorism is found. For all other source citations, the number in parentheses indicates the page number on which the quote is found.

⁴ From the January 9, 1920 entry.

From such a perspective, it might seem cruel to call Kafka's characters "mad." Albert Camus wrote that "Kafka's world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it" (129). The madman sees hope where there is none, or else he sees the hope that the others cannot see or have given up looking for. So long as he maintains this hope, his existence is meaningful, a revolt. The epithet "mad" connotes all the mysterious strength of the unknown and other. The madman is no victim; he is an agent; he takes action. So long as the Hunger Artist continues to fast, he is controlling his destiny. So long as the animal in "The Burrow" (1931) maintains his burrow, he will be safe and secure from intruders. These characters can explain their rationales with lucidity. Sometimes they even recognize the faults in their thinking. Yet we cannot ignore that they are obsessive and, to some extent, delusional. Critic Walter Sokel has claimed that "In Kafka's narratives [. . .] consciousness hides truth," consciousness in this case meaning the characters' self-deception (*Franz Kafka* 12). For Sokel, "The annihilation or refutation suffered by Kafka's protagonist, bearer of the lie, becomes the negative revelation of truth" (12). Yet Kafka's mad characters generally persist in their particular way of thinking ("not logic, but consistent method") even unto death (Camus 131). When one of Kafka's characters dies or is killed, this emphasizes his absurdity, but it also martyrs him for his mode of thinking.

According to Kafka biographer Reiner Stach, Kafka sympathized with and respected people consumed by "idées fixes [. . .], even when they had clearly crossed the threshold to insanity [. . .]," because of their "self-assurance and strength of conviction [. . .]" (*Kafka: The Decisive Years* 211). Kafka himself was consumed with a certain idée

fixe. In a letter to Max Brod, his closest friend and the original editor of most of his posthumously published works, he explained that “Writing sustains me” and that life without writing is “wholly unbearable and has to end in madness” (*Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* 333).⁵ He once remarked in a letter to his fiancée, Felice Bauer (with whom he would twice break off an engagement), that “I have no literary interests, but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else” (*Letters to Felice* 304).⁶ These are grand, almost maniacal statements (typical of Kafka), and they show that he acknowledged the looming threat of “madness” in his life. Nevertheless, there is logic (or at least consistent method) to the notion that, if Kafka was “made of literature,” then he could only “sustain” himself through writing. In one of Kafka’s *Aphorisms* (number 2), he further champions this sort of radical single-mindedness: “All human errors stem from impatience, a premature breaking off of a methodical approach [. . .]” (2).⁷

Partly because of his genius and partly because of his behavior and relationships with other people, Kafka’s mental health has been as much a subject of interest and debate as have his writings. In his lifetime, he was considered by those who knew him to be something of an odd duck. However, he was by no means unaware of his own oddness. On the contrary, his acute self-awareness may have been the root of his oddness. The psychopathologist and art scholar Louis Sass considers Kafka to have had a schizoid or schizotypal personality, noting that “[Schizoid individuals] have [. . .] an

⁵ “To Max Brod” [Planá; postmark: July 5, 1922].

⁶ [August 14, 1913].

⁷ “There are two cardinal human vices, from which all the others derive their being: impatience and carelessness. Impatience got people evicted from Paradise; carelessness kept them from making their way back there. Or perhaps there is only one cardinal vice: impatience. Impatience got people evicted, and impatience kept them from making their way back” (*Aphorisms* 3).

aloof, vaguely mysterious air, suggestive of a realm of experience hidden away from others” (*Madness and Modernism* 77), and that they may exhibit “a heightening rather than a dimming of conscious awareness, and an alienation not from reason but from the emotions, instincts, and the body” (4). Notable psychiatrist (or anti-psychiatrist, depending on one’s perspective) R. D. Laing, in his groundbreaking work on “existential psychology,” *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness*, defines the word “schizoid” in the following way:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself ‘together with’ others or ‘at home in’ the world but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation. (15)⁸

Because Kafka was hyper-conscious (of everything, including his hyper-consciousness), he neither acted nor wrote without agony; he seemed always to be struggling with a problem only he was aware of, an “experience hidden away from others,” intensely isolated. In *Madness and Modernism*, Sass goes on to note that there is considerable overlap between the features of schizotypal personality and those of modern art (Kafka was one of the early modernist writers): intellectual abstraction, emotional dearth or distance, a fragmented perception of both the external world and one’s own thought processes (7-8). Kafka’s madness, like his art, was of a decidedly modern nature.

⁸ Laing cites Kafka throughout *The Divided Self*, notably using Kafka’s story “Conversation with the Suppliant” to describe the “ontologically insecure [schizoid] person” who must always work to reassure himself of his own existence (116-117).

Contrasting features of madness traditionally associated with Romanticism with those traditionally associated with Modernism may help clarify the preceding statement. The Romantic Movement in art championed a kind of madness against the cold rationality of the Age of Reason and the de-individuating effects of the Industrial Revolution. For the Romantics, madness represented “ideas of plenitude, energy, and irrepressible vitality—a surfeit of passion or fury bursting through all boundaries of reason or constraint” (Sass 3). It should be noted that although this form of madness is seemingly the opposite of the introverted, alienated madness of Modernism, both forms have challenged the hegemony of reason, Romanticism through positive means and Modernism through comparatively negative means.

One of Michel Foucault’s primary concerns was the ways in which specific cultures define madness: Who is a madman and what constitutes his madness within a given culture?⁹ *History of Madness* and *Discipline and Punish* examine the ways madness has been measured within specific cultural epistemes and the methods with which it has been countered and/or corrected. Throughout the world and over the course of history, madmen have been alternately viewed as everything from benign oddities to genuine social threats.

The madman [. . .] has been thought of as a wildman and a beast, as a child and a simpleton, as a waking dreamer, and as a prophet in the grip of demonic forces. He is associated with insight and vitality but also with

⁹ For the earlier part of Foucault’s writing career, he aligned his ideas with structuralism. “[S]tructuralism is not a creed but [. . .] simply a method of investigation, a particular way of approaching and [. . .] rationalizing the data belonging to a particular field of enquiry” (Sturrock, *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida* 2). Structuralists deemphasize the autonomy of the sane subject; every thought she has is one of a finite set predetermined by the structures and systems under which she lives. This finite set of ideas is called an episteme.

blindness, disease, and death; and so he evokes awe as well as contempt, fear as well as condescension [. . .]. (Sass 1)

Fundamentally, the madman is an embodiment of revolt, of what a society is *not* (or not supposed to be). The madman’s “insight” is that everyone around him is a docile subject of power; his “blindness” is that he cannot accept his own subjection, that he thinks rebellion might achieve freedom (or anything else) in the teeth of order. “Fear” arises in society from his potential to disrupt the order of things, and “condescension” follows when it becomes apparent that he cannot. In *History of Madness*, Foucault traces the evolution of the perception of madness in Western society from the Enlightenment—beginning in the eighteenth century—(when madness was viewed as the absence of reason) to the Modern era¹⁰ (where madness is viewed primarily as social alienation).

One of the central conceits of the Enlightenment was that individuals and humanity are at their best when they are working for and toward that which is reasonable. Reason is an attempt by man to objectively understand himself and everything he can perceive, assuming that he *can* understand everything he perceives and that doing so will enable him to better align his life with the divine order of an omniscient God. Reason presupposes that an order exists and that this order is innately good. Consequently, a good man will work to preserve and cultivate his own inner order as well as to establish morally practical relationships between himself and his family, his community, and society.

According to Enlightenment thought, the opposite of reason was madness. Madness may be defined as disarray, disorder, confusion, or anything that confounds or

¹⁰ Roughly from the early twentieth century to the present.

subverts the enlightened view of a rational, ordered world.¹¹ By philosophers and other learned men, “madness was attacked at an angle, in its negative dimension, because it was an *a contrario* proof of what, in its positive nature, reason was” (Foucault, *History of Madness* 516). Sass would add that

since reason has [since the Enlightenment] generally been seen as the distinctive feature of human nature itself, it would seem to follow that madmen must be not merely different but somehow deficient in essential qualities of humanity or personhood. Indeed, the very word *reason* means both the highest intellectual faculty and the sane mind. (1)

It is important to note that madness, as a concept, would not exist without order; otherwise, everything would be madness, and madness would be the order. In this sense, madness has a certain duality, making the reason-unreason dichotomy arbitrary; the two might not even be distinct. Foucault wrote that

there can be no knowledge of madness [. . .] that does not, despite everything, suppose the prior movement of a critical debate, where reason confronted madness, facing it both as a simple opposition and *in the peril of immediate reversibility*.¹² (*History of Madness* 167)

He went on to say that “The nature of madness [. . .] is to approach reason so closely, and be consubstantial with it so that the two form an indissoluble text, where all that can be discerned are nature’s ends [. . .]” (177). For example,

¹¹ “Madness is irrationality, a condition involving decline or even disappearance of the role of rational factors in the organization of human conduct and experience: this is the core idea that, in various forms but with few true exceptions, has echoed down through the ages” (Sass 1).

¹² Emphasis mine.

[T]he madness of love is necessary for the preservation of the species, the delirium of ambition is required for the good order of political bodies, and insane greed is necessary for wealth to be created. Such individual, egotistical disorders are part of a greater wisdom, whose order surpasses individuals [. . .]. (177)

The reality of human life is that perfect reason or order is impossible to achieve and is, to an extent, detrimental to pursue; to expect to attain perfect order in a universe where chaos is ongoing and order fleeting is both futile and contrary to the (disordered) order of nature. Moreover, the concept of reason was developed by a small intellectual elite, by the grace of an even smaller ruling elite, and was therefore imbued with their prejudices regarding the uneducated, the poor, and the mentally ill. The creation of reason was, at its core, an exercise of hegemony; reason was simultaneously the establishment of an order and the justification of that order.

During the Enlightenment, madness was associated with libertinage, vagabondage, and criminality; the madman lacked restraint and a sense of right and wrong; frankly, he took too many liberties and desired too much freedom. Since Enlightenment times, this type of madman has been effectively subdued and/or integrated by institutions such as prisons, asylums, and the entertainment industry; the “delirium of ambition” has even led some of the mad into positions of power and authority (Foucault, *History of Madness* 177). Conversely, the modern madman intends fully to control himself; his fear of being absorbed into the social body resigns him to the most intense regimen of self-discipline and isolation.

History of Madness ends with a section about modern madness (“The Anthropological Circle”) in which Foucault describes the madman as “no longer the *insane* person who had occupied the divided space of classical unreason: he was *alienated*, in the modern form of the disease” (528). Unlike the classical madman, the alienated madman is literate and is therefore capable of defending himself;¹³ in fact, alienation may be fundamentally an act of self-defense. R. D. Laing, who was as wary as Foucault about the science of “correcting” madness, claimed that, for schizoid persons, “any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity” (45). This was true for Kafka and is clearly reflected in his writing. “In the works of Franz Kafka [. . .] the isolation of the human being seems a condition as fundamental and as ineluctable as gravity, time, or human mortality itself” (Sass 82). According to Laing, a schizoid person dreads letting his “autonomy and identity” be “engulfed” by his relationships with others and himself (45-46). Consequently, “The individual experiences himself as a man who is only saving himself from drowning by the most constant, strenuous, desperate activity” (46). Ironically, Kafka (as well as many of his characters) seemed determined to drown in his own isolation. “The main manoeuvre used to preserve identity under pressure from the dread of engulfment is isolation” (Laing 46). Kafka could preserve himself only by going away and writing.

Because the average schizoid person (unlike Kafka) is no more prone to write great literature than anyone else, and because he is certainly less prone to engage in

¹³ “Whereas, previously, in the classical experience, he [the madman] was identified instantly, without speech, by the simple fact of his presence, in the visible (luminous and nocturnal) division between being and non-being, he was from now on the bearer of a language, wrapped in a language that was never exhausted and constantly started up again, reflected in a game of contrasts and opposites, where man appeared in his madness as being other than himself” (Foucault, *History of Madness* 527-528).

discourse with the “human tribunal,”¹⁴ his asocial musings often go unheard. Schizoid people have little, if any, voice in the culture, especially compared to conspiracy theorists, doom prophets, and other paranoid people. The schizoid’s dilemma differs from the aforementioned forms of paranoia in that “sane” people can generally agree that there is *some* truth in it; society *does* de-individualize individuals, society *does* control the way we behave in subtle ways, and it is neither unnatural nor totally irrational to distrust these controlling forces.¹⁵

These forces represent reason, and it is from reason that their authority is drawn, although they might not necessarily be ethical or conscionable. Reason, from its seat of power, manages madness through correction: discipline and punishment. Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, in short, examines the history of how order (reason) has defended itself against anarchy (madness). Foucault follows this history from the public tortures and executions of pre-eighteenth century France to the modern prison system. Whereas public torture is an unquestionable symbol of an authority’s absolute power, it is also a naked example of how hideous this power can be, and when a regime has arrived at the point of blatantly murdering its subjects, it is undeniably in its death throes; the subjects cannot countenance this obvious abuse of power, their own dormant power is awakened and they revolt, and from then it is only a matter of time before the old regime is removed and supplanted.¹⁶ States with stable regimes do not publicly torture criminals; there are

¹⁴ (Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 545) [Zürich, September 30 or October 1, 1917].

¹⁵ “In this [modern] madness, man was no longer considered in a sort of absolute retreat from truth; he was there its truth and the opposite of that truth – he was himself and something other than himself” (Foucault, *History of Madness* 528).

¹⁶ However, “The purpose of contestation is not the construction of a new, better system based upon reason, truth, or humanity. Any such system will have similar effects of exclusion, which is why Foucault repudiates the desire to oppose the current law in the name of a new law” (Pickett, “Foucault and the Politics of Resistance” 450), seeing as “values themselves are the products of power,” and even “liberal norms are normalizing and instruments of domination” (463). For a more thorough examination of the

more insidious and effective ways of maintaining power over subjects. Public torture and execution were eventually done away with in favor of a non-public prison system that eliminated spectacle and privileged discipline and “correction” over violent punishment. To “correct” means either to “restore the juridical subject of the social pact, or,” more significantly, to “shape an obedient subject, according to the general and detailed form of some power” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 129). In other words, imprisonment and the discipline wreaked by it should cause the mad or disorderly subject to become, at the very least, a law-abiding citizen and, optimally, a docile, useful member of the state. The modern penal system aims to tame and integrate madness through discipline.

History of Madness is vital to an understanding of madness in Kafka’s life and works because, more than any other historical or philosophical text, it examines the social and political dimensions of madness. Kafka was driven “mad” by certain social and political pressures. He was goaded by his father (an overbearing man who, through force of will, had almost single-handedly lifted himself from poverty to the middle class,) to seek personal advancement, leading Kafka to do things he otherwise had no desire to do, such as becoming a Doctor of Law. Kafka’s doctorate in turn led to a well-paying but demanding work life which was always impinging on his writing life.¹⁷ A rise in the popularity of Zionism among the middle class Jewry of Prague (including many of Kafka’s friends) coupled with a rise in anti-Semitism and Nazism as World War II approached further alienated Kafka (who was Jewish), contributing to the darkness of his

ways in which Foucault advocated resistance in his writing, I recommend reading Pickett’s article. A common critique of Foucault’s philosophy and theories is that they seemingly preclude the possibility of resistance. Pickett effectively argues that this is not the case.

¹⁷ “Immediate contact with the workaday world deprives me—though inwardly I am as detached as I can be—of the possibility of taking a broad view of matters, just as if I were at the bottom of a ravine, with my head bowed down in addition” (Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923* 109) [January 19, 1915].

writing. *Discipline and Punish* helps explain the reservation with which Kafka carried himself through life as well as the constraints under which all of his characters struggle. In life, Kafka, like everyone else, required restraint and discipline, or else he would have been disciplined by society. In his writing, however, he could depict the evils of this restraint in an obvious yet subversive way. “Writing is a sweet and wonderful reward [. . .] for serving the devil. [. . .] Perhaps there are other forms of writing, but I know only this kind” (Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* 333).¹⁸

Many of Kafka’s works, although all were written before Foucault was even born, express certain Foucauldian ideas with uncanny prescience. By the same token, Foucault’s texts complement and illuminate Kafka’s works. For instance, two of Kafka’s stories that exemplify Foucauldian notions of disciplinary power and madness respectively are “A Report to an Academy” (1917) and “A Hunger Artist” (1922). The former is the story of an ape named Red Peter who, after being captured by humans, learns human speech and behavior and is permitted to become, essentially, a person. The latter story is in some ways the inverse of “A Report” in that the main character is a man who chooses to live in a cage for reasons that society cannot appreciate. I will argue that he is an exemplary madman and contrast him with Red Peter, who is “an obedient subject” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 129) and, in many ways, an exemplary citizen.

After analyzing these two stories, I will examine Kafka’s novel *The Castle* (published posthumously, 1926), which, more than any of his other works, brilliantly illustrates the power of state-directed confusion to maintain order in a population. Whereas the aforementioned stories feature protagonists in conflict with an implied order, an order that the reader unconsciously accepts as the same order of her own world, the

¹⁸ “To Max Brod” [Planá; postmark: July 5, 1922].

order of *The Castle* is, essentially, the novel's premise and plot. The central character K. is hired by the Castle to work in its village as a land-surveyor, only to discover upon arrival that he was summoned by mistake. Throughout the rest of the story, K. tries desperately to integrate himself with the Castle order, but it is precisely this which he can never do. Everyone in the village knows this and tries to dissuade him, but their logic cannot reach him; and because he cannot understand this, K. is a madman.

To the reader, on the other hand, the Castle's order operates according to a logic that seems absurd. But can the Castle be said to be absurd if it wields power over the village and maintains order? Can unreason rule over reason? Or is it that reason and madness are not as dissimilar as they immediately appear? As noted earlier, Foucault writes that reason and madness form an "indissoluble text" (*History of Madness* 177). I will explore this "text" in my analysis of *The Castle*.

CHAPTER II: THE CIVIL APE, THE MAD ARTIST, AND THEIR RESPECTIVE CAGES

“A cage went in search of a bird.”

(Franz Kafka, *Aphorisms* 16)

“Martyrs do not underestimate the body, they allow it to be hoisted up onto the cross. In that way they are like their enemies.”

(Franz Kafka, *Aphorisms* 33)

On its surface, “A Report to an Academy” is about the impossibility of a return to innocence. Really, it is about the impossibility of freedom in human society. At the outset of his address to the academy, Red Peter¹⁹ apologizes for not being able to fully grasp the mindset and thought processes of his former ape self, admitting “your life as apes, gentlemen [. . .] cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 174). He recognizes that he could not return to the wild now even if he wanted to; humanity would not allow it. He has been properly civilized, identified, and documented, and there is nowhere on Earth where he could run to that he would not be found.²⁰

He is a free and secure citizen of the world because he is on a chain that is long enough to allow him access to all parts of the earth, and yet not so long that he could be swept over the edge of it. [. . .] But for all that, all

¹⁹ Red Peter is called Peter after another performing ape who came before him. He is called Red because of a red scar left on his cheek from a bullet fired by the Hagenbeck firm’s hunting expedition. Red Peter’s opinion of his name: “a horrible name, utterly inappropriate, which only some ape could have thought of [. . .]” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 175).

²⁰ “Visibility is a trap” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200).

possibilities are open to him, as he is well aware [. . .]. (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 66)²¹

Prior to being shot and captured by humans, Peter had no concept of human society. And even after he was captured, the only reason, initially, he had for humanizing himself was the hope of escaping his cage. “For the first time in my life I could see no way out; at least no direct way out; [. . .] but I had to devise one, for without it I could not live” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 176-177). The cage was the first and most effective implement in disciplining Peter. Peter’s cage consisted of three barred walls; the fourth wall was the side of a wooden locker. The cage was shaped so that he could not lie down, stand, or sit, but had to crouch facing the locker while the metal bars chafed and cut into his body. He could move his limbs and head minimally to take food; this was the extent of his “freedom.”

In his lecture, Peter digresses to make a semantic distinction between the phrase “way out” (as in “find a way out”) and the word “freedom.” He knew that it would be impossible to return home now that he was on the boat; any attempt at escape would result in death. What Peter sought was a “way out” of his cage and the closest possible approximation of “freedom” he could attain through integrating himself into human society. He shares an anecdote about witnessing some acrobats performing spectacular feats at a variety show. The performance left him with the impression that “self-controlled movement” is the full extent of “human freedom,” adding that “Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theater walls could stand the shock of their laughter” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 177). The apes would see what the human spectators could

²¹ The aphorism continues: “[Y]es, he even refuses to believe the whole thing is predicated on a mistake going back to the time of his first enchainment” (66).

not see, that the trapeze artists were working for money and were not, in reality, spontaneously enjoying the movement of their own bodies. They would see that it took a great deal of work to put on the show, to put up the tent, to train the performers and staff, and to bring in spectators. They would see that the spectators paid to view the circus with money earned from jobs of their own. In short, they would see an entire system dependent on a form of slavery that maintained itself by convincing the slaves that they were actually free. This is the art of discipline. According to Foucault,

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful. (*Discipline and Punish* 137-138)

Thus, what the trapeze artists were doing was an exercise of artful restraint, not freedom. Their discipline helps drive the economy of the state, and so, by not being discouraged, they are implicitly encouraged to carry on as they will. In spite of acknowledging all of the above, this is the freedom Peter is seeking: if he wanted a more *real* freedom, he would have chosen to gnaw the lock off his cage and then to drown himself in the sea (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 179).

Peter recognizes that “as far as Hagenbeck was concerned, the place for apes was in front of a locker [. . .]” and came to the logical conclusion that he must “stop being an ape” to have any hope of escaping the torture of his cage (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 177). So he began to imitate the sailors around him. “No one promised me that if I became like them the bars of my cage would be taken away. [. . .] But if one

achieves the impossible, the promises appear later retrospectively precisely where one had looked in vain for them before” (179-180). The sailors encouraged his imitations and were amused by his ability to spit and smoke a pipe. They were especially encouraging and attentive in training him to drink alcohol. Perhaps they recognized that, once Peter began to humanize, it followed that he would also begin to consider the reality of his life and to be dismayed. Alcohol would help quell any dissenting or dissatisfied thoughts and keep Peter in a state of docility, which would be necessary if he was to join human society. Initially, Peter was repulsed by the taste of alcohol, but, with the dedicated training of an especially devoted sailor, he eventually learned how to down a bottle of schnapps and to greet the gathering crowd with a hearty “Hallo!” (182). This was merely the first step in his assimilation; if he wanted any degree of freedom in the human world, he had to acculturate to the “level of an average European” (183). In other words, he had to become a perfect student of humanity. “For the disciplined man [. . .] no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 140).

After arriving in Hamburg, Peter knew that, depending on his potential, he would either be put into a zoo or become a travelling performer, and so he did everything in his power to become the latter. “Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. One stands over oneself with a whip; one flays oneself at the slightest opposition” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 183). I am reminded of one of Kafka’s parables: “The animal twists the whip out of its master’s grip and whips itself to become its own master—not knowing that this is only a fantasy, produced by a new knot in the master’s whiplash” (*Aphorisms* 29). Kafka means that, like the trapeze

artists, the animal that whips itself is only reinforcing the master's authority in lieu of direct discipline from the master. A free animal would not whip itself, but Peter, like Kafka, knows this all too well. "There was nothing else for me to do, provided always that freedom was not to be my choice" (Kafka, "A Report to an Academy" 184). If Peter did not correct himself, the state would be forced to correct him. In becoming human, Peter subjected himself to "habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him," in the hope that his personhood would be recognized by the state (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 128-129).

Peter ends his report by telling the audience "I have achieved what I set out to achieve. But do not tell me that it was not worth the trouble" (Kafka, "A Report to an Academy" 184). His conclusion at first seems surprising, considering the Herculean effort required on his part to become human and his repeated insistence that "there was no attraction for me in imitating human beings [. . .]" (182). As noted earlier, his only options after being captured were either "the Zoological Gardens or the variety stage" (183). Peter's dilemma is analogous to the human dilemma. For the great majority of us, from birth we are expected to justify our existence to the state we live in/under. To do so, we must become useful by training to join the professional classes. If we cannot successfully prove ourselves, either we are relegated to the working class, a social, political, and economic underclass that is, effectively, a form of prison, or we violate laws in an attempt to escape this fate and are put into literal prisons. But Peter's prospects are certainly starker than the average citizen's. In spite of his spectacular performance as a human being, his country can, if they find him to be a nuisance, detain

him under the premise that he is not *technically* a human being and, therefore, is not entitled to the rights of other citizens. If he neglects his duties as a performer or speaks out against the state, he will likely be put in a zoo, if not euthanized. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*, “Power has its principle [. . .] in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (202). Peter is caught up in the power dynamic of the state;²² of course he considers assimilation to be “worth the trouble.” At home, Peter keeps a “half-trained little chimpanzee” who has “the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye [. . .]” (Kafka, “A Report to an Academy” 184). This look breaks his heart; perhaps there is no hope for her either.²³

Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist”²⁴ has much in common with “A Report to an Academy.” Both, for instance, explore themes of confinement and discipline. The eponymous Hunger Artist is, as his name suggests, a man who makes an art out of starving himself. He locks himself in a cage and fasts for forty day periods. He would go on fasting forever if his impresario would allow him; however, “Experience had proved that for about forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest [. . .]” at which point the Artist was dragged from his cage and forced to eat (Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” 246-247). During this ceremony, the impresario takes pains to emphasize the

²² “Human beings always-already find themselves in a webbing of power relations that constitutes the conditions of possibility of their identity, meaning, and moral and political values” (Dungey, *Franz Kafka and Michel Foucault: Power, Resistance, and the Art of Self-Creation* 13).

²³ It is difficult to tell from the information given whether this chimpanzee is a romantic interest of Peter’s or if she is part of an experiment foisted on Peter by the scientists and teachers who helped him acculturate. It is also possible that Peter has chosen her as a successor to his unofficial position as ape-intellect laureate of the German Empire.

²⁴ It should be noted that “A Hunger Artist” was written while Kafka was in the middle of drafting *The Castle*.

Artist's weak, emaciated state, to the Artist's great annoyance. The Artist is annoyed because he knows something that his viewing public does not: "how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world" (246). He makes a point of telling visitors this, but none of them really believes him. At the end of his life, the Artist reveals: "I have to fast, I can't help it [. . .] because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else" (255). These are his last words. And so we see that, as Foucault acknowledges in *History of Madness*, "In the madness to which the error of their ways confines them, [literary] characters [. . .] begin to speak the truth regardless of their intentions" (39). As death, the inevitable result of his devoted fasting, draws near, the Artist is compelled to acknowledge both to himself and to witnesses the reasons for his fasting, although he remains unrepentant.

The admiration the crowd expresses for the panther, who replaces the Artist after the Artist's death, is in part a relief from the latter's morbid spectacle. In other words, the crowd is happy to see the embodiment of disciplined "freedom," the same freedom as that of the trapeze artists in "A Report." The panther "seem[s] not even to miss his freedom; his noble body [. . .] seem[s] to carry around freedom with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seem[s] to lurk [. . .]" (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 255). The crowd is enthralled with what the panther *seems* to be,²⁵ whereas it is appalled by what the Hunger Artist *is*. The Hunger Artist makes no pretense. Unbeknownst to him, he displays accurately the horror that is a life confined; his imprisonment is abject and sad, and his physical appearance reflects this. The panther, on the other hand, cannot yet grasp that he will likely live the rest of his life and die in a cage. Whereas the Artist's imprisonment is a conscious choice, a deliberate revolt against reality itself (and, specifically, the fact that

²⁵ "The panther was all right" (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 255).

we must eat food to live), the panther's is not.²⁶ Should the panther begin to understand the bleakness of his situation, his insight will go largely unnoticed by the audience. Even if he becomes dejected and lies in one spot all day, with a look of utter defeat in his eyes, the audience will still be eager to stare at him, imagining how glorious he must have looked in the wild. And if, at some point, they can no longer bear to look at him, if his subjection becomes too palpable, he can be replaced by a fresh panther, or even a hunger artist, should that spectacle come back into fashion again.²⁷

The Artist is arguably a madman. On the surface, his reason for fasting, "because I couldn't find the food I liked," is ridiculous, an exaggeration made by a deranged mind (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 255). A reasonable person would have foregone disgust and eaten what was necessary to live. Instead, the Artist starves himself to death at the first chance. The Artist, like Laing's and Sass's schizoid man, is alienated not only from his world, but also from his own body. And yet, facing "a whole world of non-understanding," his conviction does not waver (250). As he dies, even as he insists that no one should admire his fasting, "in his dimming eyes remained the firm though no longer proud persuasion that he was still continuing to fast" (255).

It is safe to assume that the hypothetical apes in "A Report" who laugh at the acrobats' "self-controlled movement" would laugh just as much, if not more, at the notion of a person deliberately starving himself. But an important distinction between the acrobats and the Artist is that the Artist's "act" does not actually consist of any positive action; rather, it is a *refusal* to act. It does not require discipline in the Foucauldian sense,

²⁶ Unlike Red Peter, the panther, we have reason to assume, has neither the chance nor the foresight to assimilate into human society.

²⁷ Hunger Artist: "Fasting would surely come into fashion again at some future date [. . .]" (Kafka, "A Hunger Artist" 250-251).

that which “increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138). Obviously, the Artist is practically useless to the state, and he is hardly obedient. He is not docile, bearing in mind that “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 136). The Artist is operating according to his own principles and for his own purposes, however senseless they may seem to us. His integrity, though not really comparable to that of the free apes, is as unmitigated as a civilized human being’s can be. The lunatic persistence of the Hunger Artist is without, and in spite of, reason.

CHAPTER III: K., THE VILLAGE IDIOT

“From the true opponent, a limitless courage flows into you.”

(Franz Kafka, *Aphorisms* 23)

In *History of Madness*, Foucault describes the “Ship of Fools” of the late Middle Ages. Although obviously symbolic, these ships actually did exist. If a town had a citizen who was apparently deranged or a public nuisance, the town could pay a boatman to take him someplace else. This was an alternative to caring for the mad or locking them away:

[E]ntrusting a madman to the care of boatmen meant that he would no longer roam around the city walls, and ensured that he would travel far and be a prisoner of his own departure. [. . .] [T]he madman was *confined at the gates of the cities*. His exclusion was his confinement, and if he had no other *prison* other than the *threshold* itself he was still detained at this place of passage. In a highly symbolic position he is placed on the inside of the outside, or vice versa. A posture that is still his today, if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness. (*History of Madness* 11)²⁸

This species of confinement is illustrated in the character K. in Kafka’s *The Castle*. K. is summoned to the Castle village under faulty premises and is then essentially left to drift.²⁹ No sooner than he arrives at the Bridge Inn, his claims to being a land-surveyor

²⁸ Emphasis original.

²⁹ So K. alleges. There is evidence that he was not even accidentally summoned but came to the village under the *pretense* of being summoned. For instance, when he meets his Castle-appointed assistants for the first time, he asks them if they are his old assistants “whom I told to follow me and who I am expecting?”

are placed in doubt when Schwarzer, the son of an under-castellan, calls the Central Office of the Castle to verify. The Office initially claims that no land-surveyor has been summoned, but, just as K. prepares for the angry villagers to “fall upon him in a body,” the Office calls back, claiming that K. is, in fact, *the* “Land-Surveyor” (Kafka, *The Castle* 7). Of course, we learn later that the Castle has no need for a land-surveyor; the Mayor³⁰ tells K. that he was summoned by mistake, one perhaps traceable to a misunderstanding between departments that happened years ago. We also learn, however, that

It’s a working principle of the head bureau that the very possibility of error must be ruled out of account. [. . .] [F]or errors don’t happen, and even when once in a while an error does happen, as in your case, who can say finally that it’s an error? (84)

The Mayor believes an error occurred, and the first Control officials believe that an error occurred, “But who can guarantee that the second Control officials will decide in the same way, and the third and all the others?” (85).³¹ As political scientist Sheldon Wolin, in his *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, describes the plight of the modern citizen,

[T]oday the individual moves in a world dominated by large and complex organizations. [. . .] Everywhere there is organization, everywhere bureaucratization; like the world of feudalism, the modern world is broken

(24). If they *were* his old assistants, he would surely be able to recognize them. He also seems genuinely surprised when the Castle calls back addressing him as the Land-Surveyor, as if he *knew* that he had no actual standing.

³⁰ He is also referred to occasionally as the “Superintendent,” perhaps because in Klammer’s letter he is designated as K.’s “immediate superior” (Kafka, *The Castle* 30).

³¹ Mayor: “Is there a Control Authority? There are only Control authorities” (Kafka, *The Castle* 84).

up into areas dominated by castles, but not the castles of *les chansons de geste*, but the castles of Kafka. (354)

In bureaucracies, the distance between the higher ranking supervisors (the Castle officials) and the lower-level employees (the villagers) is so great that little empathy can exist between them. Consequently, supervisors are bound to abuse their underlings, unwittingly or otherwise, and the underlings' appeal for a redress of grievances may be so difficult as to be deemed not worth the trouble, for it is an appeal against no one person, but the bureaucracy itself, a challenge to the supposed perfection of the system, a challenge that, in all likelihood, the system has encountered before, accounted for, and incorporated into its modus operandi.³² When K. intimates his intention to access the Castle, he is rejected by it as readily as a healthy body rejects a familiar virus.

Bureaucracy is a modern and effective method for dampening the human desire for justice and ensuring docility in subjects. The hope of any bureaucracy is that the order it creates is so comprehensive and organic that those who live within its structure never notice the imposed order even while being able to identify and isolate individuals in conflict with said order. Foucault, in his *The Order of Things*, explains what order is and how it works:

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of

³² “Leopards break into the temple and drink all the sacrificial vessels dry; it keeps happening; in the end, it can be calculated in advance and is incorporated into the ritual” (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 20).

this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there,
 waiting in silence for the moment of its expression. (xx)

Beneath the Castle's panoptic gaze, order arises seemingly from thin air; K.'s situation brings to mind the crows of *Aphorism 32*: "The crows like to insist a single crow is enough to destroy heaven. This is incontestably true, but it says nothing about heaven, because heaven is just another way of saying: the impossibility of crows" (32). Similarly, the Castle is just another way of saying: the impossibility of K. The type of person that K., with his autonomy and willfulness, represents is not permitted to live or work within the village; his personality type is not granted any legitimacy within the Castle episteme. The Mayor offers to alert K. should the Castle ever make any decision regarding him.³³ Until then, K. will remain "a prisoner of his own departure" (Foucault, *History of Madness* 11).

K.'s primary intention throughout the novel is to access the Castle. He would also like to have his status as Land-Surveyor officially affirmed by the Castle and by Herr Klamm (his ostensible employer) specifically. But what is the motive underlying these intentions? K. lists practical reasons, but they all seem superficial. Unlike Kafka's Hunger Artist, K. seems determined to keep his real motives secret, and so we must deduce them. Kafka scholar Martin Greenberg asserts that,

 K. does not want a job in [. . .] the castle bureaucracy; he does not want to be fitted in as a working part of the control mechanism of the automatism of the world. What he wants is to confront Klamm with his own concrete being, with his own individual person, and after Klamm other, remoter forces, so as to compel the Castle to acknowledge [. . .] his freedom. (171)

³³ Out of pity for K., the Mayor does eventually offer him a job as the janitor of the school.

His ostensible eagerness to join the Castle order masks his real intention: to defy this order. K. wants to concretize Klammer and the other abstract Castle officials, but he also wants to abstract himself from the dim, unthinking order of the village. “K. knew that he had no real compulsory discipline to fear [. . .]; but the pressure of [. . .] a growing resignation to disappointment, the pressure of the imperceptible influences of every moment, these things he did fear” (Kafka, *The Castle* 32).

Writing from Zürau to Felice Bauer, after recently experiencing the first symptoms of the tuberculosis that would kill him gradually over the course of the next few years, Kafka candidly explained himself:

When I examine my ultimate aim it shows that I do not actually strive to be good. [. . .] Very much the opposite. I strive to know the entire human and animal community, to recognize their fundamental preferences, desires, and moral ideals, to reduce them to simple rules, and [. . .] to adopt these rules so as to be pleasing to everyone, indeed [. . .] so pleasing that in the end I might openly act out my inherent baseness before the eyes of the world without forfeiting its love. [. . .] In short, my only concern is the human tribunal, and I would like to deceive even this, and what’s more without actual deception. (*Letters to Felice* 545)³⁴

Although this passage predates the writing of *The Castle* by several years, it provides valuable insight into both K.’s and Kafka’s psychology. K. is seeking “to deceive [. . .] without actual deception,” to understand all of the “rules,” written and unwritten, so that he might, in spite of his “inherent baseness,” move unhindered into the Castle. K.’s

³⁴ [Zürau, September 30 or October 1, 1917].

seemingly equivocal morality has led some critics to question his motives. For example, critic Günther Anders views K. as an utter conformist.

K.'s unremitting endeavour is to follow all the precepts, to assimilate them inwardly and to justify even the immoral claims of the rulers. [. . .] Kafka represents the ruling powers as evil, and the efforts of the newcomer as a dutiful determination to conform with evil: thus the conformist *acknowledges* evil as good, even though he *knows* differently. (100)³⁵

Such a viewpoint is corroborated by some of K.'s own comments and assertions. For instance, in his conversations with Olga regarding Barnabas' work in the Castle, K. muses that,

Fear of the authorities is born in you here, and is further suggested to you all your lives in the most various ways and from every side, and you yourselves help to strengthen it. [. . .] Still, I have no fundamental objection to that; if an authority is good, why should it not be feared?

(Kafka, *The Castle* 239)

K. has seen and heard enough at this point in the story to question whether the Castle authority is really "good." Anders further points out that "All Kafka's philosophical aphorisms show how he not only describes this attempt at [moral] justification, but also approves of such an equivocal undertaking. [. . .] He too is to some extent an apologist of conformism" (100). Kafka wrote in *Aphorism* 29 that "The reservations with which you take Evil into yourself are not yours, but those of Evil," and in *Aphorism* 54, he posited that "what we call Evil is only a fleeting necessity in our eternal development" (29, 54). These aphorisms indicate that, for Kafka, there is such a thing as necessary evil; evil is

³⁵ Emphasis original.

the only effective weapon if one is to fight evil.³⁶ K.'s outward conformity, I would argue, does not betray his "ultimate aim." Like Kafka himself, K.'s "ultimate aim" is neither to "strive to be good" nor to revel in evil but to attain to a state of freedom that paradoxically escapes conformity with the Castle order through a careful conforming *act*. K. later qualifies his statement regarding the Castle's authority, claiming that the reverence the villagers have for the Castle is "a mistaken reverence, [. . .] a reverence in the wrong place, the kind of reverence that dishonors its object" by not holding the object to a higher standard (Kafka, *The Castle* 241). K. is not after "any act of favor from the Castle, but [his] rights" (96). K. may play along with the Castle's game, but he does so only with the intention of winning.

In spite of K. being alerted early on that he can "Never" enter the Castle, the potential to undermine the Castle organization does exist, if only in the faintest realm of possibility (Kafka, *The Castle* 28). Such a possibility is frequently hinted at,³⁷ although almost universally discouraged, and it never quite materializes. Bürgel, a "liaison secretary" between the Castle and village secretaries, concedes to K. late in the novel that "there are sometimes, after all, opportunities that are almost not in accord with the general situation, opportunities in which by means of a word, a glance, a sign of trust, more can be achieved than by means of lifelong exhausting efforts" (337). The "opportunities" to which Bürgel is referring are the nighttime interrogations of "applicants" (complainants) by secretaries. He explains:

³⁶ "Evil is sometimes like a tool in your hand, recognized or unrecognized, you are able, if you have the will to do it, to set it aside, without being opposed" (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 95).

³⁷ Gardena, the landlady of the Bridge Inn: "I don't deny that it's possible once in a while to achieve something in the teeth of every rule and tradition. I've never experienced anything of that kind myself, but I believe there are precedents for it" (Kafka, *The Castle* 67).

One tends involuntarily to judge things from a more private point of view at night, the allegations of the applicants take on more weight, [. . .] the judgment of the case becomes adulterated, [. . .] the necessary barrier between the applicants and the officials [. . .] weakens, and where otherwise, as is proper, only questions and answers are exchanged, what sometimes seems to take place is an odd, wholly unsuitable changing of places between the persons. (339-340)

Even though they are fully aware of these dangers and make every effort to fortify themselves, the secretaries, Bürgel alleges, often err in favor of the applicants. Moreover, although the “half-unjustified gains” the applicants win can be formally revoked, “this [. . .] will only profit the law; it will not be able to damage the applicant any more” (340). However, these gains are meager at best and will only serve to dupe the applicant into believing that he might achieve something significant. To really hope to achieve anything, Bürgel posits, the only real possibility lies in an applicant surprising a secretary who was not assigned to the applicant but who, nevertheless, is competent to help his specific case.³⁸ The applicant tempts the secretary to go above and beyond the call of duty. “By his mute presence, if by nothing else,” the applicant “constitutes an invitation to penetrate into his poor life, to look around there as in one’s own property, and there to suffer with him under the weight of his futile demands” (348). “The applicant wrings from us in the night, as the robber does in the forest, sacrifices of which we should otherwise never be capable [. . .]” (349). Not only will the secretary promise to help, but

³⁸ As Bürgel admits, however, “I don’t know anyone among my acquaintances to whom it has ever happened; well, it is true that proves very little, the circle of my acquaintances is restricted in comparison to the number involved here, and besides it is by no means certain that a secretary to whom such a thing has happened will admit it, as it is, after all, a very personal affair and one that in a sense gravely touches the official sense of shame” (Kafka, *The Castle* 347).

he will even make good on that promise. “To put it precisely,” Bürigel explains, “one is desperate [. . .]” to remain objective during a nighttime interrogation; “to put it still more precisely, one is very happy” to help the poor applicant (348).³⁹ It becomes apparent that Bürigel is referring to K.’s specific situation: K. was summoned to the Herrenhof to meet the secretary Erlanger; upon arrival, K. finds out that Erlanger will not be able to meet with him until morning; he looks for Erlanger’s room but mistakenly enters Bürigel’s room instead; and Bürigel listens to K.’s situation and offers to help. This “wholly unsuitable changing of places” between secretaries and applicants, where the secretaries represent reason and the applicants represent madness, mirrors Foucault’s thoughts on the volatility, “the peril of immediate reversibility,” of the reason-madness dichotomy (*History of Madness* 167). K. has inadvertently stumbled upon a rift in the fabric of the Castle’s reality. For the first time in the novel, K. is potentially in a position of power; his “madness” has won a convert in Bürigel, literally waking the secretary from his official slumber and enticing him to act benevolently of his own will, as though he were a free human being; indeed, Bürigel says everything shy of admitting that he would like to see K. undermine the Castle bureaucracy.

But while Bürigel is giving his speech, K. is drifting in and out of sleep, “impervious to all that was happening” (Kafka, *The Castle* 350). Even so, Bürigel insists that K., simply in putting forward his complaint, has done all that was necessary: “fulfillment is already waiting, [. . .] indeed it is already coming to meet, [. . .] all that is essential has been done, [. . .] one must resign oneself and wait” (350). However, by the

³⁹ Bürigel: “How suicidal happiness can be!” (Kafka, *The Castle* 349).

novel's end,⁴⁰ K. has received no official help. When Erlanger, the secretary K. was supposed to be meeting that night, summons him away, Bürgel makes this cryptic statement: "Everything here is full of opportunities, after all. Only there are, of course, opportunities that are, in a manner of speaking, too great to be made use of, there are things that are wrecked on nothing but themselves" (351). Could he be referring to the very opportunity he was explaining to K., the opportunity whose possibility he describes with such ambivalence?⁴¹ Could this opportunity carry so much weight that it literally knocks K. unconscious? It is impossible to know whether Bürgel is being truthful; he may be just another defense mechanism of the Castle, an expert either at humoring applicants or boring them to sleep.

K.'s subsequent meeting with Erlanger, like all of his other meetings with officials, leaves him with little hope and leads him to the following conclusion: "The orders, the unfavorable and favorable, disregarded him, [. . .] and he was in much too lowly a position to be able to intervene or, far less, to silence them and to gain a hearing for his own voice" (Kafka, *The Castle* 355).⁴² When K. says "orders," he means "commands," as when Erlanger orders him to make sure that Frieda, a village girl with whom he has just ended a romantic relationship, returns to her position as barmaid at the Herrenhof so as to avoid the (admittedly unlikely) possibility of disrupting Klammer's work. Of course, K.'s conclusion could also be interpreted as implying that "the hidden network that determines the way [things] confront one another" in the Castle disregards

⁴⁰ The "end" of *The Castle*, which happens not long after this interrogation, is merely a point in the text where Kafka stopped writing. Like Kafka's other two novels, *Amerika* and *The Trial*, *The Castle* is unfinished and was published posthumously, against the author's expressed wishes.

⁴¹ Bürgel: "You think it cannot happen at all? You are right, it cannot happen at all. But some night—for who can vouch for everything?—it *does* happen" (Kafka, *The Castle* 347).

⁴² "Earlier, I didn't understand why I got no answer to my question, today I don't understand how I presumed to ask a question. But then I didn't presume, I only asked" (Kafka, *Aphorisms* 36).

his personhood and is only concerned with making use of him (if it cannot ignore him altogether), as when Erlanger orders him to help restore the order that he, in drawing Frieda away from the Herrenhof, has managed to disrupt (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xx). Most of the villagers and Castle officials make a point of belittling K.; yet his persistence upsets them greatly, and his efforts coerce the Castle into (unofficially) appointing him to positions and assigning him tasks.

The village and the Castle condescendingly view K. “like a newcomer, the last settler in the world of reason” (Foucault, *History of Madness* 486). The bemused officials treat K. with professional courtesy and counter his madness with patient reason; he is even allowed to move freely about the village. This seemingly obvious technique for controlling the mad was pioneered by the English reformer Samuel Tuke. In the “Birth of the Asylum” section of *History of Madness*, Foucault considers Tuke to be one of the fathers of the modern mental institution. Tuke’s asylum “was no longer,” as Foucault put it, “a cage for man abandoned to his savagery” (*History of Madness* 479), but was, as Kafka might call it, “a zoo arranged on the most modern principles, in which the animals are given complete freedom” (*Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* 154).⁴³ In this asylum, the mad were relatively unrestrained, free to move about the premises and assigned menial (usually unnecessary) chores and tasks. Of course, this relative freedom was conditioned entirely upon good behavior; the threat of restraint or punishment was always looming. The madmen in Tuke’s asylum were restrained not by chains but by the knowledge that they were being observed.

⁴³ Kafka wrote of his time in Zürau, where the farm animals were more or less community property, that he experienced “the feeling, with all of its unpleasant aspects, [of] living in a zoo arranged on the most modern principles, in which the animals are given complete freedom” (*Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* 154) (“To Felix Weltsch” [Zürau, beginning of October 1917]).

A similar fear seems to permeate the Castle village. Foucault's analysis of Tuke's methods coupled with his conception of panopticism help us to understand how the Castle maintains power over and order in the village. Panopticism is essentially a system of surveillance in which the subjects are potentially always being watched and so must always behave. The system is based on philosopher Jeremy Bentham's concept of the Panopticon, a prison design consisting of a central watchtower surrounded by transparent cells. The prisoner cannot hide from the watchman's gaze, nor can he see into the watchtower; for all he knows, the moment he transgresses may be the same moment the watchman's eye falls on him. The watchman has an omniscience second only to God's:⁴⁴

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, [. . .] in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed [. . .] – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.
(Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 197)

Bentham himself believed that the Panopticon concept could be extended not only to similar institutions such as schools, hospitals, and insane asylums, but to whole towns as well (Corbella 68-69). The Castle and its village are a literary example of such a town. The Castle sits on a hill overlooking the village. It cannot be reached through deliberate action; only by its own benevolence can anyone enter the Castle. K. experiences this

⁴⁴ “When K. looked at the Castle, often it seemed to him as if he were observing someone who sat quietly there gazing in front of him, not lost in thought and so oblivious of everything, but free and untroubled, as if he were alone with nobody to observe him, and yet must notice that he was observed, and all the same remained with his calm not even slightly disturbed” (Kafka, *The Castle* 128).

early in the novel as he tries to reach the Castle on foot. “For the street he [K.] was in [. . .] did not lead up to the Castle hill; it only made toward it and then, as if deliberately, turned aside, and though it did not lead away from the Castle, it led no nearer to it either” (Kafka, *The Castle* 14). Like the aforementioned “citizen of the world” of *Aphorism* 66, K. is on a chain that extends only so far (66). If there is a watchman in the Castle, he is Count Westwest. The (possibly fictional)⁴⁵ Count is never once seen, and he is the ultimate authority of the Castle, deciding who may live and work in the village. Though he is hardly mentioned outside of the earlier chapters of the novel, he is apparently the linchpin holding the insane bureaucracy of the Castle together. Whether he exists or not is irrelevant; the fact that the Count *might* exist is enough to secure the authority of the other Castle officials and to preserve order in the village.

The other officials seem to be aware of everything, to *see* everything (while taking great pains not to *be seen*). But they are arguably no threat in themselves. They avoid contact with villagers whenever possible; seeking them out only drives them further away, as K. proves in his pursuit of Klammer. As Richard Sheppard describes them, “The officials are unpredictable, inaccessible, elusive and almost invisible to the mortal eye” (192). Although the villagers regard them with an awed, at times fanatical respect, the officials have little, if anything, to do with punishment. When a villager transgresses, the Castle does not have to intervene. According to Walter Corbella, “[T]he power structures [of the Castle] are kept in place by the pervasive fear of a ubiquitous bureaucratic system and by the threat of a punishment that is seldom actually

⁴⁵ “[T]he non-existence of the Count is suggested by the fact that the whole Castle administration resembles a hive from which the queen bee has been removed, and in which the surviving bees swarm about frenetically and pointlessly” (Sheppard, *On Kafka’s Castle: A Study* 54).

administered or experienced” (69).⁴⁶ As in Tuke’s asylum, “Fear” is the “essential character” of the Castle village (Foucault, *History of Madness* 483). K. is not as mad as the village would have him think. Paradoxically, the villagers behave as though they were the lunatics at Tuke’s “Retreat,” in whom madness manifested itself not as the state of being a terror, but of being terrified, “*afraid*, helplessly, irrevocably afraid, entirely in thrall to the pedagogy of good sense, truth, and morality” (483). The village’s fear ensures that it will punish transgressors more or less automatically. This is what happens to Amalia, whose story is told by her sister, Olga.⁴⁷

When Amalia is delivered a letter from a Castle official named Sortini in the middle of the night, its contents infuriate her so much that she tears the letter to shreds and throws it in the messenger’s face. Olga manages to read the letter before Amalia rips it up but cannot grasp just what Sortini is asking, only that “It was a summons to come to him at the Herrenhof, [. . .] couched in the vilest language,” and that the final sentence is: “See that you come at once, or else – !” (Kafka, *The Castle* 249-250). This sort of summons from officials is not uncommon in the village. In fact, many village girls aspire to receive such a summons and to become mistresses of the officials. Frieda is Klamm’s mistress prior to K.’s arrival; Olga sleeps with the servants of officials and even tells K. that she would have eagerly accepted Sortini’s summons had she received it. Amalia, however, assaults Sortini’s messenger and refuses to meet him at all.

Word about Amalia’s refusal spreads quickly. Soon, customers come to retrieve their unfinished shoes from Amalia’s Father, a cobbler: “[T]hey asked for nothing better

⁴⁶ Corbella maintains “that Kafka’s Castle operates on the basis of panoptic principles, relying on an authoritarian regime and permanent surveillance for the sake of individual discipline and social stability” (70).

⁴⁷ Amalia’s story has taken place approximately three years prior to K.’s arrival in the village.

than to break every connection with us quickly and completely [. . .]” (Kafka, *The Castle* 263). “We all knew that no definite punishment would be visited on us. We were only shunned. By the village and by the Castle” (268). Initially, the village’s reaction is purely out of self-interest. They empathize with the family but have to distance themselves for fear of the Castle: “[I]t was the painfulness of the subject as much as their fear that made them draw away from us, simply to avoid hearing about it or speaking about it or thinking about it or being affected by it in any way” (270). Olga asserts to K. that if the family would simply maintain its innocence, or claim that the situation is resolved, or even show themselves in the village again, the villagers, eager to move past the scandal, would accept and reintegrate them. However, since they fail to do this, the village “turned what had only been a temporary measure into a final resolve, and cut us off from the community forever” (273).

In fact, the family intended to resume its life in the village but could not bring itself to do anything in the face of Amalia’s stern silence. According to Olga, Amalia “had taken the lead in the family [. . .] almost by her silence alone” (Kafka, *The Castle* 270-271). But no one in the family blames Amalia. Olga still has a deep respect for her, for, “Amalia not only suffered, but had the understanding to see her suffering clearly [. . .]. She stood face to face with the truth and went on living and endured her life then as now” (272). Amalia’s sense of personal integrity is unique in the Castle universe. She has a “cold, hard eye,” her only distinguishing feature, a look that draws everyone’s attention while simultaneously keeping them at a distance, a look both arrogant and righteous (267).⁴⁸ Her gaze, devoid as it is of any delusions regarding the Castle or its

⁴⁸ Olga: “[I]nvoluntarily, one had almost literally to bow before her” (Kafka, *The Castle* 245).

officials, immediately puts K. ill at ease.⁴⁹ It holds a contempt which K., in his ambition to access the Castle, cannot help but extend to himself. In turn, K. has contempt for Amalia's utter disinterest in "Castle gossip," as she calls it (265). K. somehow fails to see the parallels between Amalia's obstinacy and his own. Amalia stands defiantly against the Castle, going as far as to martyr herself and her family. K. seeks to undermine the Castle through deception and conformity with evil (Anders 100). Even though their methods are opposite, both oppose the same Castle, and, as fellow opponents of the same established order, they are equally mad.

Returning to panopticism and its extraordinary potential for control, one might ask: Is the punishment of Amalia's family real, or is it only in their minds? A better question might be: Does this even make a difference? Olga's dread answers these questions better than any of her explanations do:

[W]hile we couldn't help noticing the ostracism of the village, the Castle gave us no sign. Of course we had had no sign of favor from the Castle in the past, so how could we notice the reverse? This *blankness* was the worst of all. (Kafka, *The Castle* 268)⁵⁰

If the Castle officials are being genuine in what they say when Father begs them to forgive his family, then the Castle actually has no grievance (274). Whether the officials are telling the truth or not, Amalia's family can never be certain either of its innocence *or* guilt, nor can the rest of the villagers. Only the Castle can be certain, and the Castle *is* the only certain thing. As such, it is the keeper of both hope and certainty. In withholding these, the Castle turns the village against the family and turns the family

⁴⁹ K.: "Amalia's distinguishing mark is hardly a recommendation, and repelled me the first time I saw it" (Kafka, *The Castle* 267).

⁵⁰ Emphasis mine.

against itself. The Castle is complicit with the family's suffering, but then so is the family. All they need to do is return to normal village life as if nothing has happened, as if they are as guiltless as they claim to be. "How am I to explain it?" Olga despairs, "We weren't afraid of anything in the future, we were suffering under the immediate present, *we were actually enduring our punishment*" (269).⁵¹ Because Amalia will neither repent nor pretend nothing untoward happened, the "curse" of isolation will remain on her family (252). This punishment is metaphysical, and it is highly effective; it is generated ("engineered," as Olga claims) by the Castle's invisible machinations, and it permeates the entirety of the village (260). It is a force, like gravity; though no one directly witnesses the mechanisms generating it, no one could deny its influence either. As in any functional panoptic town, the Castle's power exists all around the family, and its authority is internalized *by* the family (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 128-129). It is as real as the snow that covers everything in the village. Under the pressure of the Castle's "blankness," Amalia's family crumbles (Kafka, *The Castle* 268). This "blankness" conceals the fine-tuned operation of the Castle bureaucracy.

⁵¹ Emphasis mine.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

While some critics have asserted that K. is an amoral conformist, many others have maintained the opposite. For instance, critic Frederick A. Olafson considers K. to be the lone moral man in a village full of conformists. The villagers have disdain for K. “Because he persists in viewing his case as a miscarriage of justice [. . .]”⁵² (Olafson 89). In doing so, he reminds them of the “inconsistency between their general assumption that the Castle is always right and the perhaps never quite suppressed deliverance of their own moral consciousness” (89). K. may be “an alienated man,” but, “the villagers are alienated in another and profounder sense. [. . .]. [T]hey have alienated their own moral autonomy” (89). Gardena, the landlady of the Bridge Inn, is infuriated by K.’s persistence, calling him “the most ignorant person in the village [. . .]” and referring to his ideas as “Madness, absolute madness” (*The Castle* 72, 108). Perhaps most of all, she is annoyed by K.’s “ignorance of [. . .] the *real* state of things,”⁵³ his refusal of the order of things, the way of the world, so to speak, which everyone in the village, like the spectators in “A Report to an Academy,” is no longer capable of questioning (71-72). By the end of the novel, K. does not acknowledge the futility of his quest, but does admit to the possible wrongheadedness of his approach up to this point. After his nighttime interrogations, in a conversation with Pepi (the waitress who has replaced Frieda in the Herrenhof and is about to cede her position back to Frieda), K. states:

I don’t know whether it is like this, and my own guilt is by no means clear to me; only, when I compare myself with you [Pepi] something of this

⁵² K.: “I understand [. . .] that a terrible abuse of my case, and probably of the law, is being carried on. As for me, I shall know how to protect myself against it” (Kafka, *The Castle* 90).

⁵³ Emphasis mine.

kind dawns on me: it is as if we had both striven too intensely, too noisily, too childishly, with too little experience, to get something [. . .] by crying, by scratching, by tugging—just as a child tugs at the tablecloth, gaining nothing, but only bringing all the splendid things down on the floor and putting them out of its reach forever. (404-405)

Even while expressing something like regret for all the disorder he has caused, K. cannot view his quest as anything less than necessary. Even as he learns of the failures of others (Gardena, Amalia and her family), even as he is made a fool by the Mayor, his own assistants, and even Frieda, he cannot be swayed. K. proves that

Madness is the purest and most complete form of *quid pro quo*: it takes the false for the true, death for life [. . .]. But it is also the most rigorously necessary form of *quid pro quo* within the dramatic structure, for it has no need of an external element to reach its final conclusion. All that needs to be done is to push the illusion until it reaches the truth. (Foucault, *History of Madness* 39-40)

Even if K. is mad and the way he thinks is demonstrably wrong, the “reason” of the Castle bureaucracy is still, as Kafka might say, “hollow sophistry” and, as such, must be opposed (*The Diaries of Franz Kafka: 1914-1923* 194).

Kafka used the phrase “hollow sophistry” when referring in his diaries to the notion that, while tuberculosis was draining the life from him, all he could do was despair: “No matter how sorry a constitution I may have, [. . .] it is hollow sophistry to argue that there is only one thing to be done with such a constitution, which must perform its best, and that that one thing is to despair” (*The Diaries of Franz Kafka:*

1914-1923 194).⁵⁴ One can safely assume that none of Kafka's friends, family, or doctors were arguing that he should despair. Kafka was trying to steel himself against his imminent death and all of the oppressive feelings attendant to it; even unto death, Kafka resisted. The last piece in his *Aphorisms* reads as follows:

[A:] "It cannot be claimed that we are lacking in belief. The mere fact of our being alive is an inexhaustible font of belief."

[B:] "The fact of our being alive a font of belief? But what else can we do but live?"

[A:] "It's in that 'what else' that the immense force of belief resides: it is the exclusion that gives it its form." (109)

To believe in anything is a sort of madness. Madness is the force that spurs us to live in spite of subjugation; it is that negative space, that "what else" that holds the potential for freedom, the potential to broaden epistemes, to topple ossified power structures, and to create a world more conducive to human life. Madness is neither good nor evil; it is a reaction against the violence and exclusion that a society depends on in order to exist, a reflection of the ills endemic to a society. And as long as these ills persist, so too will the mad.

⁵⁴ From October 16, 1921.

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