

AGAINST ALLEGORY. A REAPPRAISAL OF FRENCH EXISTENTIALISM'S ENCOUNTER WITH KAFKA

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ABSTRACT

In the reception history of Kafka in France 'true' understanding of his work is commonly associated with the rejection of allegorical modes of reading. The latter is therefore only acknowledged in the 'official' Kafka scholarship from the '60s onwards. Contrary to this opinion, my article will reassess the French existentialist reception of Kafka's work by showing that those readings are already steeped in reflections on the nature of the literature/philosophy divide that show that the existentialists already argued against allegorical readings. I will do so by exploring the concept of the 'metaphysical novel' which the existentialists discuss as a response to the above concerns and through which they argue that metaphysical experience and literary expression must be regarded as part of the same single movement of writing. This insight is far-reaching: it shows that the existentialist understanding of Kafka is in need of revision not only in terms of the purported 'philosophical' meaning but also in terms of the reception history and the universal meaning attributed to Kafka's work under the influence of existentialism.

Keywords: Kafka, French existentialism, novel of ideas, metaphysical novel

Introduction: The Denunciation of French Existentialism in Kafka Studies

In Kafka scholarship the French existentialists count among the most vilified interpreters of his work. Even if the post-war period witnessed the emergence of a research strand which draws on a broad tradition of existential thinking (ranging from currents as divergent as Martin Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *existentialisme*) the exponents of French existentialism have typically been chided for decontextualizing Kafka's literary work and turning him into a mere representative of their own philosophy. To a certain extent it is the very popularity that Kafka gained under the influence of existentialist thinking that evoked this resistance. In the postwar period Kafka had come to exert a pervasive influence on intellectuals as well as on the general public (Szanto 169). The influence on the former, as Dorrit Cohn ironically phrases it, acts "as a kind of objective compulsion, to the point where there is hardly a writer with modernist pretensions who would *not* acknowledge his influence" (Cohn 19). Similarly, among French philosophers, his importance is acknowledged by thinkers as diverse as André Breton, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and many more.

If the term 'Kafkaesque' originally referred to features of Kafka's literary work, "especially after World War II and *under the influence of existential philosophy*, the term came to be applied to presumably typical features of the twentieth century, such as the horrors of the concentration camps, the inhumane aspects of technological progress, and the domination of totalitarian state regimes" (Gray, et al., *A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia* 156, my emphasis). By entering into everyday language even the general public contributed to the postwar 'Kafka vogue'. To speak of the 'Kafkaesque' whenever one is overwhelmed by undecipherable forces at least offered the consolation that there was a name for such absurd situations; that an author of obscure origin had voiced one's own personal concerns and allowed for communicating these by way of his works. If Kafka seemed to authorize all of these references at once, it was because the scope of his work could be no less than the truth of the human condition as such – a recognition which the experience of the war had elicited, for it stirred up the experience of human solitude and alienation that

Kafka was said to have anticipated. Indeed, it is no coincidence, as Richard T. Gray suggests, that the eminent Kafka scholars Walter Sokel and Heinz Politzer – *émigrés* from Germany and Austria respectively – reinvigorated the field of Germanic Studies and German departments in America in the '50s precisely by bringing Kafka's *universality* to light (Gray, 'Un-Verschollen' in Amerika, 370).

If the existentialists contributed to the discovery and widespread acclaim of an author, who had hitherto been relatively unknown in France, what one of the most influential French critics, Marthe Robert, holds against them is that their 'appropriation' of Kafka significantly harmed the understanding of his work. In a letter to George Szanto, Robert claims that "Kafka was adopted in France, virtually naturalized, like no other foreign writer ever was" (Szanto 167). In an effort to reaffirm Kafka's singularity against this blatant universalization Robert wrote a scathing article on "Kafka en France"¹. Unlike the work of other great authors, so she contends, Kafka entered France coming from a 'no man's land'.² The reception of his work lacked virtually all contextualization that would make it 'readable' in the perspective of its author's biography, the historical situation surrounding its composition or its literary affinities³. Stripped bare of such contextualization the author appeared to transcend all common boundaries and, hence, was taken to represent truth of universal value. "In fact, this exterritoriality was a celestial privilege: coming from nowhere and belonging to no one, Kafka seemed quite naturally to have fallen from the sky" ("Kafka en France" 16).⁴ The indefiniteness of Kafka's protagonists as well as the lack of spatial and temporal specifics in the text lend itself easily to perceiving his work as a universal expression of human existence. The seeming 'emptiness' of his work was therefore readily filled with whatever the interpreter projected onto it, thus revealing less about Kafka than about the interpreter. As testimony to this particular situation of the 'French' Kafka, Robert points out, Bernard Groethuysen's preface to the first French translation of *The Trial* (1933) fails to mention as much as the author's origin, his contemporaries and the language in which he wrote his works. And upon discussing Kafka's literary interests with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Robert claims that the latter refused to acknowledge Kafka's outspoken admiration for Flaubert.

The author's attitude towards Flaubert is quoted as evidence of yet another instance of negligence that Robert deems characteristic of the existentialists' dealings with Kafka. Indeed, she particularly laments the way in which they mistakenly take Kafka "für einen als Dichter verkleideten Philosoph[en]" [for a philosopher in disguise of a poet] ("Die Aufnahme in Frankreich" 686), whose work was subjected to interpretations that merely sustained their own thought – a procedure she elsewhere calls "philosophie appliquée" (*L'Ancien et le nouveau*, 195). She sees confirmation of the interpreters' philosophical inclination in the fact that Kafka was 'thoughtlessly' included among such thinkers as Hegel, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard rather than among his favorite (literary) authors such as Werfel, Kleist, Grillparzer, and others. The existentialists are therefore typically added to a long list of Kafka interpreters – in France and elsewhere – whose true interests lie not within the realm of literature proper but rather in psychology and psychoanalysis, theology, political theory or philosophy.

Even if Kafka were a "philosopher groping for a form rather than a novelist groping for a theme," as the American journalist and educator Max Lerner (145) contends in 1941, it was not the former's search for a form that animated the first decades of Kafka scholarship.⁵ The prevailing view that Kafka was a thinker who happened to express himself with literary means accounts for the multitude of readings that attempt to elucidate the work's philosophical underpinnings rather than its artistic qualities (see, among others, Reiss). Shortly after Kafka's introduction in France, as for example Franz Kempf (12) shows, "critics beg[a]n to allegorize, singling out different aspects of Kafka's ambiguity as absolute, all for the sake of unequivocal meaning. In doing so, Kafka's critics translate his work into the languages of theology, philosophy or psychology" (compare also Robert, *L'Ancien et le nouveau* 194). An act of translation is indeed implied in the common pronouncements that K. represents the Absurd hero, or that his work is made to exemplify a Sartrean metaphysics (Beicken, "Typologie der Kafka-Forschung" 801; Manchec 10-

11; Schmeling “Verraten und verkauft?” 302-3). When the existentialists ‘adopted’ Kafka as one of their own, he was allegedly made to ‘fit’ conceptions already developed and laid out in their philosophical works.⁶ Robert therefore argues that

To everybody [Kafka’s] work appeared as essentially symbolical; as a result, there was no need to engage with the way in which he composed his fables, the details he introduced in the narrative or the internal coherence his stories evinced. From the perspective of the universal that Kafka had in view, these things were secondary and the important issue was to decipher his work using the appropriate key [...] in order to bring to light what Kafka *had wanted to say* but incidentally *had not said* (“Kafka en France” 19).

It is this act of ‘translation’ that sets the existentialist readings apart from those that followed the war. Indeed, the rejection of allegory as the proper mode of interpretation constitutes a paradigm shift in Kafka-criticism hailed by Dorrit Cohn (20) as a “salutary moment” and by Robert as that moment – more or less since the ‘60s – when “the true (reception) history of Kafka in France only finally begins (“Die Aufnahme in Frankreich” 783).

Kafka’s French Reception

Marthe Robert’s view of the existentialist reception of Kafka has been taken over by almost all critics writing on Kafka in France although there is reason to problematize it. Besides lacking a clear understanding of an existentialist metaphysics (cf. *passim*) Robert also failed to examine in depth in what ways Kafka’s name occurs in their works and is content to condemn them on the basis of a few of the most well-known reference to the Prague author’s work. Moreover, there is a historical paradox to her criticism. Robert had first voiced her concerns about the proper understanding of Kafka in her 1946 *Introduction à la lecture de Kafka*, that is to say, when existentialism was at its height. However, the essay contains no explicit criticism of Sartre and the existentialists. Curiously, by the time she explicitly articulates her criticism of Sartre and the existentialist influence on Kafka, interpretation had been largely superseded by proponents of the *nouveau roman* such as Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Nonetheless, she published her text without significant changes in a variety of journals both in French and German in the course of several decades.⁷ In spite of these issues, Robert’s criticism has resounded forcefully in Kafka scholarship, where her stance has been repeated time and again.⁸ In reference to Robert, Dorrit Cohn, for example, asserts that “to the Surrealists Kafka offered a model for fantastic literature, to the Existentialists a paradigm for the philosophy of the absurd” (19). Likewise, in their influential study *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari draw on Robert’s views when they confirm: “in France [...] the initial success of Kafka was based on this misunderstanding – a Kafka who is simultaneously intimate and symbolical, allegorical and absurd” (95). That this view of the existentialist readings still holds true in current Kafka criticism is apparent from the recent *Kafka Handbuch*, which argues that interpretations on the basis of existentialism continued until the 1970s. The respective critical works regarded “Kafkas Werk als Veranschaulichung von Weltangst, Nihilismus, Absurdität, Entfremdung und Isolation”. What is more,

Diese Analysen sind nicht nur oft durch eine Neigung zur Allegorese geprägt, sondern auch durch eine erhebliche Ferne gegenüber Kafkas Texten. In der neueren Forschung dagegen sind die Fragestellungen versachlicht und die Texte wesentlich präziseren, die jeweilige ästhetische Faktur integrierenden Lektüren unterzogen worden. Überdies lässt sich hier einige adäquate Skepsis gegenüber Bestrebungen beobachten, Kafkas Werk als bloße Illustration philosophischer Denkmuster und Einsichten zu verrechnen (Auerochs and Engel 63).

This denunciation of the existentialist reading of Kafka as allegorical or as a tool in exemplifying philosophical claims falls short of an adequate appraisal of the existentialists' dealings with Kafka, even if part of the criticism is justified. Their readings, as I argue here, are themselves already *anti-allegorical* since they take a cue from a conception of lived (metaphysical) experience that cannot be reduced to conceptual thinking and for which literature is a particular medium of expression. Because Kafka scholarship on this topic has relied almost exclusively on Marthe Robert's position it is flawed in many respects. For one, critics discussed only a few texts that were taken to represent the existentialists' dealings with Kafka as a whole: Sartre's remarks in *Being and Nothingness* and Camus' *Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka*. Moreover, critics conspicuously omitted a number of relevant thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean Wahl, and they failed to recognize the scope and depth of references made to Kafka's work in existentialist writings. Finally, and most important, their assessment of allegorical readings shows that they did not understand that existentialism does not rest on traditional metaphysics, but re-assesses it in such a way that literature in general, and Kafka's work in particular, are not interpreted in terms of a metaphysical *system* but rather as a metaphysical *experience*. The difference between the two explains why the criticism of the (allegedly) allegorical approach in existentialism is misguided: the latter defines the existential experience primarily in terms of the ambiguity of the subject's relation to the self, to time, the world, and the other. In evoking *lived* existence as dramatic and ambiguous, literature is recognized as a privileged source of philosophical insight. However, in taking a cue from literature an existentialist (and phenomenological) philosophy loses the comfort of objective and systematic reasoning.

Robert's influence on the dominant criticism attacking the 'existentialist' Kafka is evident. The critical discourse might have turned out more nuanced, especially in recent decades, if Sartre's relation to the Prague author had been explored in greater detail. Two sources would have been particularly helpful in this regard, if it weren't for their (almost) complete loss for contemporary readership. As early as 1939, Sartre had promised an article to the anti-pacifist leftist periodical *Les Volontaires* [The Volunteers]. Unfortunately, the periodical ceased to exist before the end of the war and no traces of any preparatory notes for Sartre's study on Kafka have remained (*Les Mots et autres écrits autobiographiques* 1400). Similarly, on May 31st 1947, Sartre delivered a lecture at the Iéna Hall (Paris) entitled "Kafka, a Jewish Writer" of which only two short reports have survived.⁹ Nonetheless, if these studies reveal a profound interest in Kafka, the recurrence of the author's name throughout Sartre's published work testifies to its persistence in his thought. Surprisingly then, in summarizing Robert's analysis Peter Beicken asserts (and this applies for the literature on this topic in general):

Bevor ein durchgreifender Wandel in der Kafka-Lesart eintreten konnte [nach sein erster Einzug durch den Surrealismus], erfolgte gleichsam sein zweiter Einzug in Frankreich mit der Adoptierung durch den Existentialismus, ein Vorgang, für den Robert Jean-Paul Sartre als Initiator angibt (316), *wenngleich Sartres Bemerkungen zu Kafka sehr spärlich sind* (*Franz Kafka* 42, my emphasis).

This alleged absence of a sustained reading on the part of the existentialists might have convinced commentators that there was little to say on the topic, but – paradoxically – the opposite is true. Walter Sokel, for example, asserts that even if Camus' commentary on Kafka is perhaps the best known, Sartre's relation to Kafka is even more profound. Yet he offers little to support this argument and instead presents a Sartrean reading of Kafka.

Sartres Bemerkungen über Kafka in *L'être et le néant*, *besonders seine längste und wichtigste*, eignen sich als Ausgangspunkt für unser Thema und die Erhellung van Kafkas Beziehung zur Existenzphilosophie (Sokel 262, my emphasis; compare also Nayhauss 74).

Albeit one of the best studies written on the topic, Maja Goth's early monograph *Kafka et les lettres françaises* (1956), suffers from a similar discrepancy between question and method, which ultimately leads the author to dismiss the question altogether. Her study opens by quoting Sartre as saying that he was "profoundly influenced by Kafka" yet – ironically – it concludes that "one cannot properly speak of influence [...] we have seen that the most telling similarities are to be related to a shared sensibility of the times" (255-56). Assuming an intrinsic relation between Kafka's work and existential thinking, critics regularly cast the relation in terms of comparable worldviews and therefore largely confirmed the notion of reductive, philosophical readings. It is telling in this regard that critics almost never refer to the existentialists' writings on literature but restrict themselves to the philosophical works. In *À la recherche de Kafka* Claude Prévost (20) asserts that in the post-war era Kafka mainly functioned to illustrate philosophical claims deriving from existentialism: "Pour toute une génération d'intellectuels français, la 'révélation' de Kafka est due à la lecture qu'ils ont faite, dans les années 1945-1950, de Camus et de Sartre. As Lauterbach (306) confirms:

Denn rezeptionsgeschichtlich gesehen handelt es sich bei solchen Lesarten um Perspektiven, die auf einem z.T. noch zeitgenössischen historischen Kontext Kafkas basieren, auch wenn sie diesen zumeist nicht als solchen reflektiert haben, sondern vielmehr selbst vom existenzphilosophischen Gedankengut geprägt wurden *und aus ihm heraus Kafkas Texte aufnahmen* (my emphasis).

Despite the explicit denunciation of the existentialists' readings the critics involved neither thoroughly engage the theoretical and autobiographical work in question nor considered the evidence of their understanding of Kafka contained in them. This is all the more surprising since the dominant view could easily have been repudiated by exploring the 1940s debate on the metaphysical novel and the existentialists' discussions of allegorical writing, which had been provoked by criticism against existentialist literature that was widely regarded as a mere illustration of philosophical views. But it is perhaps even more astonishing that Marthe Robert's views were accepted with such ease considering that in her 1960 memoirs *The Prime of Life* Simone de Beauvoir herself already explicitly rejected the interpretive strategy for which they were so heavily criticized afterward:

The Trial appeared, but created little excitement at the time, the critics showing a marked preference for Hans Fallada; but for us it was one of the finest and best books we had read in a very long while. *We perceived at once that it was pointless to reduce it to mere allegory, or search through it for symbolical interpretations [...]* (150, my emphasis).

Symbol and Allegory in the Poetics of French Existentialism

The publication of Blanchot's 1945 article "les romans de Sartre" – referred to by Beauvoir (*The Prime of Life* 558) as 'his essay on the novel of ideas' –, Vladimir Weidlé's "L'ère des allégories" (1948) and René Micha's "Une nouvelle littérature allégorique" (1954) allow the inference that the topic of philosophical literature in general, and allegory in particular, were at the center of interest among French intellectuals of the postwar period. The re-emergence of allegory in the works of authors such as Borges, Beckett, Blanchot, Camus and Sartre, according to Helen Weinberg, showed that each, although in differing ways, set out to redefine the merits and demerits of a literature that was seemingly "extraordinarily abstract". It lent prominence to the quest over character and to eternity over the transient (Micha 697; compare also Weinberg 23). These features, as they emerge from a particular mode of writing and reading, were typically depreciated. Traditionally, in the mode of allegory the text is taken to hold hidden meaning to be uncovered if one were to understand it properly. The concrete appearances depicted in the novel are therefore disregarded as mere 'fiction' to the extent that they only offer an 'entrance' to

what lies beyond them in terms of more abstract concepts and ideas (Kafka's castle as divine grace, the trial as the burden of original sin, etc.). Not only the level of abstraction but also the 'mechanical' translation of image and idea implied in allegory accounts for the unfavorable appraisal it has received in literary criticism. "Seit der Klassik galt die Allegorie als eine ästhetisch minderwertige Form. Gegenüber dem Postulat eines Ästhetisch autonomen, intransitiven Kunstwerks wurde die Allegorie als eine heteronome, subalterne Zweckform verworfen: sie hat ihren Zweck nicht in sich, sondern außer sich.[...] Die Allegorie erschien [...] als mechanisch, starr, leblos, frostig' (Hegel)" (Kurz 56-57).

Contrasting this state of affairs, both Micha and Weidlé regard Kafka, quite paradoxically, as both the earliest exponent of the modern allegory and its principal innovator. "His entire work is conceived of and constructed allegorically," asserts Weidlé, "but what his numerous imitators have not understood at all is that Kafka's allegory is polyvalent. The way he employs it, allegory *is outside and beyond the literature of ideas* [...] *as well as the apologue carrying a univocal intellectual content*" (40, my emphasis). If Weidlé proposes the concept of a 'polyvalent allegory' which refuses a univocal meaning and instead offers a multitude of readings, none of which is eventually confirmed, Micha (704) regards Kafka's work as a 'total allegory': "Kafka's superiority over [Julien] Graçq (sic) or Buzatti lies in the fact that in his writings allegory coincides with the world. It is absolute. It neither begins nor ends, occupies all space and possesses a time of its own." Unlike traditional allegory, whose very reason of existence would lie in its ability to point beyond itself (cf. supra), "Kafka's universe does not point to another world that would reveal, in spurts, repose or order." While retaining the concept of allegory, these critics reveal the shifting meanings associated with the concept in the postwar period. Following in their vein, existentialists such as Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir proposed a radical reorientation of the relation between figural language and philosophical thought. They reject the notion of allegory altogether and substitute for it an understanding of the 'metaphysical novel'.

In his review of Sartre's *Nausea* Camus developed a theme he had already touched upon in his notebooks when he argued that "People can think only in images", and therefore concluded: "If you want to be a philosopher, write novels" (*Notebooks, 1935-1942* 10). Similarly, in his review of Sartre's debut novel he declared: "A novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images. And in a good novel, the whole of the philosophy has passed into the images." "But the philosophy," he added, "need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a label, the plot loses its authenticity, and the novel its life" (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 199). The greatest peril confronting the existentialist novelist in 'risking' philosophical literature would indeed seem to be the oft-discussed matter of a lifeless work. A 1945 review of *The Blood of Others*, for instance, condemned Beauvoir for having written a thesis novel. When asked about the risk that characters would be merely 'incarnated ideas' she replied: "I know well that this is the pitfall [l'écueil] of the metaphysical novel" (Beauvoir *The Useless Mouths and Other Literary Writings* 3). Blanchot's review of Sartre's novels contributes to the same debate when it starts out by asking why the novel of ideas has such a bad reputation. He suggests that one of many reasons is the fact that "the characters are reproached for being lifeless," but he goes on to show that, in fact,

it is the idea that is lifeless: it no longer resembles anything but itself, it has only its own meaning; the artificial world hides it too poorly, it is more visible there than in its original bareness, so visible that it scarcely has any secrets to offer us (*The Work of Fire* 191).

In a similar move Camus suggests: "the great novelists are philosophical novelists—that is, *the contrary of thesis-writers*. For instance, Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux, Kafka, to cite but a few" (*Sisyphus* 101, my emphasis). These authors have created their own universe rather than simply telling a story and refrain from adding any deeper significance than they know to be legitimate from the mere description of their own experience. Contrary to thesis-writing the works of such

authors are called symbolic in a specific sense: Whereas allegory answers precisely to a hidden content the author wishes to express in disguise, “a symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing” (*Sisyphus* 124). As such, a symbolic work presupposes a different interpretive strategy: “the surest means of getting hold of [a symbolic work] is not to provoke it, to begin the work without a preconceived attitude and not to look for its hidden currents. For Kafka in particular it is fair to agree to his rules, to approach the drama through its externals and the novel through its form”¹⁰. To approach the novel through its form was to read it ‘literally’, i.e. to remain on its surface and not to seek a reality behind the novelistic universe. It will be clear that Camus’s take on Kafka thereby already announces the criticism against so-called metaphysical interpretations voiced, for instance, by Alain-Robbe Grillet in his essays on the new novel. In the end, though, Camus clearly does not go so far and is content to conclude that:

[t]he whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view. [...] But it would be wrong to try to interpret everything in Kafka in detail. A symbol is always in general and, however precise its translation, an artist can restore to it only its movement: there is no word-for-word rendering (*Sisyphus* 124).

It was precisely this precarious ‘translation’ which, Sartre, according to Camus, had failed to observe in *Nausea*. In his debut novel the balance between thought and image was ‘broken’, causing an excess of theory which harmed the novel’s ‘life’. If Camus reproached Sartre for not seeing that a symbol must always be a symbol *in general* [symbole en gros], i.e. exceeding univocal interpretation, Sartre himself – ironically – repudiated *The Plague* on account of its overt symbolism.¹¹ In conversation with Yves Buin in 1964, Sartre declared on account of the notion of realism in the arts that “one mustn’t go from a refusal of realism à la Zola to symbolism. [...] Camus, in *The Plague* speaks in symbols” (Sartre and Buin 43). Even if Camus had stated that a great work of art defies any principle of explanation, in Sartre’s view the image of the plague was clearly too obtrusive. Undoubtedly guided in his judgment by *The Plague*’s ‘explanatory’ motto, borrowed from Daniel Defoe, that “it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not,” Sartre concluded that the strong suggestion of a hidden meaning (the parallel between the plague and the German occupation was evident to contemporary observers) was detrimental to the literary value of the work. “What is the plague,” Sartre asks, “Fascism? Can the struggle against the merciless disease be transposed to the human plane?” (Sartre and Buin 43). If it can, Sartre concluded, it was valid to question the work and to hold the author accountable for the meanings it suggested; greater novelists, on the other hand, were not liable to such a critique.

Melville’s masterpiece *Moby Dick* is a case in point. Sartre does not ask what the white whale is supposed to signify, but instead describes the paleness of Melville’s novelistic universe as a means of penetrating his relation to the world, i.e. his ‘metaphysics’. Sartre argues that “what will immediately strike you when you enter this novel is the absence of all color” and this leads him to contend that it is “at the level of this indistinctiveness of substance that the real drama of *Moby Dick* is played out, Melville is condemned to live at the level of being.” Hence,

we have to resist seeing his narrative and the *things* he describes as a universe of symbols. One takes an idea and then adjusts a symbol to it afterwards: but Melville has no preconceived idea he wants to express. He only knows of things and finds the ideas afterwards, at the base of things. I’m certain that at the beginning he merely wanted to tell as well as he could the story of a whale hunt (Sartre “*Moby Dick*” reprinted in Contat and Rybalka 634-37, emphasis in original).

Before turning to the concept of the ‘metaphysical novel’ which the existentialists elaborate as a response to these concerns I will briefly elucidate the philosophical underpinnings of a literature that endeavors to express the author’s experience and for that reason is explicitly anti-symbolical.

Literature and Metaphysical Experience

Confronted with the *débâcle* of the thesis novel and other manifestations of the literature of ideas the existentialists argued for a conception of writing in which literary expression is not so much related to the conceptual domain but rather to that of existential experience. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, “for a long time it looked as if philosophy and literature not only had different ways of saying things but had different objects as well” (“Metaphysics and the Novel” 26). However, since the end of the 19th century the ties between literature and philosophy have grown ever tighter. “Everything changes,” he shows “when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world or of discovering its ‘conditions of possibility,’ but rather of formulating an experience of the world” (idem: 28; compare also Blanchot “Les romans de Sartre” 191-2). Underlying this contention is the effort to reformulate a universal notion of metaphysics in terms of singular metaphysical experience:

Classical metaphysics could pass for a specialty with which literature had nothing to do because metaphysics operated on the basis of uncontested rationalism, convinced it could make the world and human life understood by an arrangement of concepts. It was less a matter of explicating than of explaining life, or of reflecting upon it (Merleau-Ponty, “Metaphysics and the Novel” 27).

Systematic abstract philosophy generalizes and thereby effaces the aspect of lived experience which is constitutive of human existence “since neither subjectivity nor temporality have a real place in these metaphysics” (Beauvoir “Literature and Metaphysics” 274). Each attempt at intellectual reconstruction of lived events and experiences necessarily reduces their dramatic force, opacity and ambiguity, while literary description retains at least some degree of the concreteness and immediacy of experience. Whereas traditional metaphysics claims to offer universal knowledge [savoir] of the essence of life the existentialists emphasize that such system building presupposes an objective point of view that is unavailable to man. This is not to say that universal assertions are entirely absent from their work – one of its core concepts, *la condition humaine*, suggests as much – but it is always only through an investigation of singular existence that such claims are formulated. In relying on an experiential account of lived existence the existentialists make way for the dimension of singularity even if they tend to approach it dialectically in relation to the universal. What the notion of the singular brings in, specifically in relation to an existentialist literary theory, is *difference*. By condemning the allegorical (or the symbol, as shown in reference to Camus) and in favoring a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘allusive’ (cf. infra) understanding of literature the existentialists acknowledge that the latter can never univocally utter truths, precisely because the truth of an individual existence is never present to a living subjectivity. It will be clear that in discussing an allegorical interpretation of the existentialist Kafka, critics have relied too much on a traditional understanding of metaphysics. In this view, the existentialists would merely have attempted to draw out univocal concepts of their philosophy in order to ‘illustrate’ these in their readings of literature.

Contrary to this approach Beauvoir argues that one does not ‘do’ metaphysics as one does mathematics or physics, i.e. by applying a set of rules or axioms to ‘empirical’ data. “In reality, ‘to do’ metaphysics is ‘to be’ metaphysical; it is to realize in oneself the metaphysical attitude [...]” (“Literature and Metaphysics” 273). This attitude, as Ulrike Björk has pointed out, in many ways resembles Merleau-Ponty’s description of a “metaphysics in action” [métaphysique en acte] which can best be described “in terms of a ‘radical subjectivity’ that one forgets in one’s natural or everyday life, and a type of knowledge

where one's experiences are inseparable from their meaning" (147). This 'lived experience' [expérience vécue] of existence "is perpetually susceptible of comprehension, but never of knowledge" (Anderson et al. 20-21).

Hence, in meditating a renewed concept of metaphysics, Merleau-Ponty addresses it not in terms of a knowledge [savoir], but rather in terms of an 'explicitation' of human life "which is a contact with the world which precedes all thought *about* the world" ("Metaphysics and the Novel" 28). Even if existence continually allows for a kind of non-reflective comprehension our relation to the world nonetheless perpetually escapes us. In pointing to the dimension of ignorance (or alterity) pertaining to human existence, which is suppressed in universal metaphysics accounts, Sartre refers to André Gide's phrase « la part de diable » [the devil's share]. The situation, as formulated by Gide and found in exemplary fashion in Kafka, so Sartre avers in *Being and Nothingness*, is

[that] the "situation" escapes me. To use an everyday expression which better expresses our thought, I am no longer master of the situation. Or more exactly, I remain master of it, but it has one real dimension by which it escapes me, by which unforeseen reversals cause it to be otherwise than it appears for me (265).

It comes as no surprise to find that literature is the realm where the 'metaphysical truth' of an individual life (the author's as well as the reader's) can, if not recovered, at least be 'explicitated' or brought to light.

For a novel to deliver this truth it must be an 'honest' expression of the author's own lived experience. Thus, when Beauvoir notes, as mentioned above, that at the time *The Trial* appeared she "perceived at once that it was pointless to reduce it to mere allegory, or search through it for symbolical interpretations," she proposes instead that we should see "that [Kafka] expressed a totalitarian worldview [vision du monde totalitaire]" (*The Prime of Life* 150). Since the notion of the author's *worldview* appears to be a little bit too idealistic, as she observes herself ("Untitled contribution" 80), it would perhaps be better "to talk about one's 'situation,' which denotes the active and involved relationship of each consciousness to its world (Sirrige 131). Though written in 1960 the assertion in her second autobiographical volume refers to Sartre's 1943 article on Blanchot and the fantastic novel. In recalling Sartre's understanding of this genre she argues that "Kafka called in question the purpose not only of man's artifacts, functions, and activities qua individual, but also of his relationship to the world at large, globally considered" (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life* 186). What is particularly important in this regard is that Kafka's work is interpreted from the perspective of the specific social and historical context in which it was written (cf. infra), as well as the historical circumstances in which Sartre's article was written, i.e. during the German Occupation. It is because such a *situated* understanding of literature was missing that Sartre rejected the symbolism of Camus's *The Plague* as well as a realism "à la Zola". Whereas the former claims to offer an intellectual reconstruction of metaphysical experience through the literary image, the latter presupposes that it can be objectified. Any novel that presents itself as an expression of general truths, such as the realist novel, however, implies

that the author can survey his object. The author would thus have "a surveying consciousness": the author, deposed, soars above the world. In order to get to know the social world, he has to pretend not being conditioned by it; to know intersubjective psychology, he has to pretend not being conditioned psychologically as an author. Well, this is clearly impossible for the author. Zola sees *the-world-that-Zola-sees* (*Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* 95).

Beauvoir thus concludes that "[w]e speak of a literary work when an author is able to manifest and impose a truth; that of his relation to the world, that of his world" (Beauvoir, "Untitled Contribution" 80). A

theorization of this type of literature is found in the concept of the 'metaphysical novel'.

The Metaphysical Novel

The introduction of this concept must first of all be understood in the context of criticism raised against existentialist literature. Merleau-Ponty first employed the notion in his 1945 article *Metaphysics and the Novel* which favorably reviewed Simone de Beauvoir's literary debut *She Came to Stay* [*L'Invitée*] and thereby sought to repudiate criticism that had condemned it for being amoral. But Merleau-Ponty also worked out a more general reflection on the nature of philosophical literature. "The work of a great novelist," he asserts, "always rests on two or three philosophical ideas" ("Metaphysics and the Novel" 26). Yet the novel's 'ideas' such as the experience of time (as in Proust), the subject's relation to History (as in Balzac) or the unattainability of the transcendent (as in Kafka) never release a transparent meaning. As an 'explicitation' rather than explanation of human existence, "the function of the novelist is not to state these ideas thematically, but to make them exist for us in the way that things exist. Stendhal's role is not to hold forth on subjectivity; it is enough that he make it present" (ibid.). Since lived experience is not susceptible to knowledge it cannot hope for a transparency of expression: "Philosophical expression assumes the same ambiguities as literary expression, if the world is such that it cannot be expressed except in "stories" and, as it were, pointed at" (ibid.). That the conceptual language of philosophy is inadequate in addressing these aspects of existential experience is shown à propos of Kafka when Beauvoir maintains that

There may even be thoughts that cannot, without contradiction, be expressed in a categorical manner. Thus, the novel is the sole form of communication possible for Kafka, since he wishes to portray the drama of man confined in immanence. To speak of the transcendent, if only to say that it is inaccessible, would already be claiming to have some access to it. An imaginary account, on the other hand, allows us to respect this silence that is alone appropriate to our ignorance (Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics" 274, my emphasis).

Beauvoir elaborated this idea in response to Merleau-Ponty's *Metaphysics and the Novel*. First presented as a debate on 'The Novel and Metaphysics' at the *Club Maintenant* on December 11th 1945, she more fully developed the topic in her article *Literature and Metaphysics* ["Littérature et métaphysique"] published in *Les Temps modernes* in the following year.¹² Beauvoir asserts that Kafka's novel *The Castle* "represents two meanings which are superimposed on one another; one is novelistic, the other metaphysical". However, if this leads us to think "that the existence of a metaphysics harms the novel," as she argues in her lecture, "it is because one assumes implicitly that the author has to 'introduce' metaphysics 'in' the novel, but if he proceeds like that he will only prove himself to be a clumsy author" (Astruc 1044). As Sartre had already observed in 1941 on account of Melville's *Moby Dick*, metaphysics is not 'introduced' at the outset of philosophical literature. Rather, the metaphysical novel must be regarded as the result of the author's authentic search (or "adventure of the mind") which is "lived out in the course of the building of the system" (Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics" 272). If Melville at first meticulously described the adventure of a whale hunt, after some hundred pages "the documentary starts cracking on all sides" as "Melville [...] has suddenly come to understand 'in clear light' [à blanc] the meaning of this strange connection between Man and animal which is the *hunt*" (Sartre, "Moby Dick" 635). Likewise Beauvoir argues

Thus, as the story unfolds, [the author] sees truths appear that were previously unknown to him, questions whose solutions he does not possess. He questions himself, takes sides, and runs risks; and, at the end of his creation, he will consider the work he has accomplished with astonishment. He himself could not furnish an abstract translation of it because, in one single movement, the work gives itself both meaning and flesh ("Literature and Metaphysics" 272).

The contention that metaphysical experience and literary expression are part of the same single movement of writing is indicative of the influence of phenomenological thinking on existentialist' poetics. "If speech presupposed thought," notes Merleau-Ponty, "we could not understand why thought tends toward expression as towards its completion [...] as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it" (*The Phenomenology of Perception* 206). According to Philip Lewis "authors such as Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, and Kafka," are prime examples of this idea since they "have powerfully demonstrated that their thought takes form only as they are writing, that their art is fully conceived only at that moment when it receives verbal formulation" (23). Perhaps in reference to Kafka's *The Judgment* – which the author composed in one run during the night of 22 September 1912 – Sartre argued that

Kafka doesn't write as a consequence of reflexive analyses. To the contrary, he writes extremely fast, in a state of semi-somnolence, so as not to separate the components that are united in his consciousness (Derins, "Kafka, a Jewish Writer" 25-26).

Similarly, Beauvoir has commented on Kafka's way of writing and concludes that "it is impossible to separate the way of telling and what is told, since this telling is the very rhythm of the author's search, it is a way of defining it, it is a way of living" ("Untitled contribution" 85-86) It is precisely this (phenomenological) emphasis on the act of writing as an experience itself that leads her to dismiss allegory and symbolism: "Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* are not adjusted symbols, but the very way in which Kafka has sought to actualize for himself, for the reader, the truth of his experience" (Ibid.).¹³

Thus, even if the existentialists are traditionally regarded as advocates of a realist poetics,¹⁴ the formal qualities of a literary text matter only insofar as they are able to impose the author's truth. As Toril Moi (194) shows, "Realism [...] is not a salient issue for Beauvoir. Since all a writer can do is to show us the world she or he sees, we are always in the writer's universe, regardless of genre and style". While this is true, it is also clear that there is a persistent *mimetic* concern to their literary-theoretical convictions. This is evident in a short article by Beauvoir in which she compares the theater to the novel and argues that in any case:

If [the author] wants to be convincing, he must not copy the real world like the naturalists wanted to, but rely upon it for support [prendre appui sur lui]. Its presence must be suggested in such a way that the fiction, be it heroic, poetic, or even fantastic, unfolds against the backdrop of a world [se déroule sur fond de monde]. ... This concern for the natural can be found in Kafka, as well as in Stendhal, in Poe as in Dostoevsky. Even during the most exceptional stories, we must still feel immersed in this everyday world. If not, they seem gratuitous to us and do not move us ("The Novel and the Theater" 104).

These reflections on the nature of literary writing as the expression of lived experience serve to clarify the extent to which the existentialists shied away from an allegorical reading and its supposed 'method' of illustrating philosophical concepts. Contrary to the infamous difference between poetry and prose expounded in *What is Literature?* it must be clear that since the mid-1940s and in accordance with the concept of the metaphysical novel Sartre had come to stress an aspect of *non-savoir* and silence implied in the literary discourse rather than adhering to the direct communication of a truth. This is important because it shows that for the existentialists literature is not subservient to philosophical thought. If the reception history of this period needs to be revalued in order to take this 'methodological' debate into account, it is even more important to address a related major flaw in the assessment of the existentialist reception: its contribution to the coming into being of an abstract, ahistorical Kafka in the postwar period.

Literature and the Mystification of our Being-in-the-World

At the beginning of this article I mentioned that American scholarship during the 1950s contributed significantly to bringing the universal aspect of Kafka to light. Similarly, after the war and as a response against the early decades of Kafka studies, during which psychological, theological, metaphysical and philosophical interpretations prevailed, a specific interest in Kafka's artistic means arose. This turn to the literary aspects of the work (approaches that are generally called 'werkimmanent') was dominant in West-German *Germanistik*. This is no coincidence because it is especially in a German context that the emphasis on Kafka's art, though a much needed development, also served to exclude social and historical dimensions from the field in order to elude uncomfortable questions about the Nazi era, Jewish authors, and the presence of ideologically compromised prewar scholars in the postwar academic establishment. In considering existentialism to have similarly excluded the concern for historicity and biographical issues in Kafka, Robert is probably erroneously equating Camus's article on Kafka with the broader existentialist interpretation under scrutiny in the later context.

After all, I believe to have shown that the 'metaphysical' reading proposed by Sartre and Beauvoir was directed toward broader contextualization. In seeking to understand artistic expression in relation to existential experience, Sartre initiates a move directly opposed to the subsequent criticism of the 'existentialist' Kafka. On numerous occasions Sartre refers to lived reality and the historical context pertaining to Kafka's work. In a revealing contribution he declares that "it is certain that one has tried to turn [Kafka's] protagonist into a representation of modern man," but "what strikes us immediately is that bureaucracy is the last of his worries. His relation to his father, to the Jewish community in Prague, [...] his personal problem – at once social and mystical – this is what is expressed in his great works and in his short stories" (Sartre "La guerre froide et l'unité de la culture" 796).¹⁵ These concerns, of paramount relevance to the troublesome aftermath of the war in France, are not only visible in the work of the later Marxist Sartre but are present from the start. Indeed, they are at the center of his 1946 Kafka lecture, as we learn from an important review: "Understanding Kafka's work when so many possible interpretations could be offered is no simple task. The connecting thread Sartre proposes in order to bring these together is the life of the author" (Revel). In fact, the importance of these concerns is also clear from Sartre's remarks about Kafka in *What is Literature?* and from the various existential author biographies which Sartre develops as case studies of an 'existential psychoanalysis' – the method for the analysis of an individual life project announced at the end of *Being and Nothingness*.

As the expression of a metaphysical experience the anti-allegorical position of the existentialists is intimately connected with the concern for historicity and the social. This is because their conception of literary language as radically equivocal signals the absence of a true understanding of existential experience, which in turn reflects the inevitable contradictions of living a historical situation. In other words, the allegorical mode of writing and reading suggests the existence of a clear-cut truth and hence, the realm of the universal; the metaphysical (which is sometimes called 'allusive') posits a mystification of (general) truths, and hence the inevitability of the singular. Indeed, Sartre emphasizes at once the impossibility of fully understanding one's own existential experience and the necessarily ambiguous nature of the language used to elucidate it. The reasons for this lack of self-understanding are in fact manifold. They result logically from Sartre's conceptualization of human existence as the radical disjunction of man's wish to exist in the fullness of being and the contingency of the world in which he stakes his actions. What further complicates this contradiction at the heart of the human condition is the existence of the Other with whom we must live while we are forever separated from it since we cannot penetrate its consciousness. Our own acts, especially when confronted with the existence of others, always run the risk of turning out differently than we expect. In historical terms, man's being-in-the-world is such that he can

never understand the true meaning of his actions. Writing, in Sartre's thought, is the imaginary realm where the confrontation takes place between the writer's particular (mystified) condition and his impossible endeavor to elucidate it. Hence, for the writer, literature "constantly indicates those modes of being-in-the-world that are lived as indecipherable" (*Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels* 113) – an attempt that for Sartre is exemplified in Kafka, among others.

Sartre sees a strong connection between the ambiguous nature of existential experience and the ambivalence of the language used to describe and surpass it. In the 1946 lecture on Kafka Sartre speaks of a 'symbolic transcription' and an 'allusive' language which must be used to "reawaken a knowledge buried within us" (Derins, "Kafka, a Jewish Writer" 26), while he resorts to different formulations in the course of the 1960s. In his *Plea for Intellectuals* he argues that "The writer can testify only to his own being-in-the-world, by producing an ambiguous object which suggests it allusively" (277) and he therefore regards Kafka's work as "an objective and mysterious narrative, a sort of symbolism without symbols and or anything precisely being symbolized, in which metaphors never indirectly convey information" (*Between Existentialism and Marxism* 282). Indeed, in order to speak its truths literature cannot be either literal or symbolical. When asked to comment on the potential of Bergman's movie 'Le Septième Sceau' to elucidate the global fear of an atomic war, Sartre avers that it is too symbolical. Another movie devoted to the same theme, 'Dernier Rivage' is rejected because it is truly sentimental [véritable mélo]. Rather, Sartre suggests that the work of art dealing with a political issue – and of any situation in general – shouldn't necessarily refer to it explicitly: "the fear of a nuclear war must spring forth from literature as a terror coming from the work itself and that may even bear another name" (Sartre and Buin 43; compare also Sartre "Untitled Contribution" 124). Of course, if it merely bears another name it would present itself as allegory, but this is not what Sartre is suggesting. Paradoxically, if literature is to offer a means of elucidation it must manifest itself as a discourse that is dense and impenetrable: "the most revealing [révélatrice] and esthetically efficient work has a density [densité] which manifests a certain obscurity," Sartre avers. This obscurity is not to be confused with a work that is simply difficult or hermetic, but bears on the nature of the literary discourse itself, which defies explication. It is the nature of literature – as it manifests itself in the work of Kafka and many others – that its very truthfulness can only emerge when it has abandoned the allegorical impulse:

We are not dealing with an intentional obscurity but – in a work where everything could be superficially clear – with overlapping significations [téléscopage des significations] and contradictions that are lived and experienced but not theoretically defined, etc. *Man is unfathomable [obscur] to himself to the extent that society as a whole is unknowable [obscure] to itself.* He fights these society's contradictions when he attempts to express himself in order to elucidate his existence; but elucidation cannot be complete without losing truthfulness (at least for the artist) (Sartre and Buin 43, my emphasis).

In conclusion, I want to return to the alleged paradigm shift inaugurated by post-existentialist approaches. Taking their cue from the allegorical, philosophical and universalist readings that Sartre and other existentialist philosophers suggested *à propos* of Kafka's work, the majority of critics in the post-war period have dismissed 'the existentialist Kafka' altogether. In the *Kafka Encyclopedia*, the difference between both traditions that have served to reject existentialism and its relation to Kafka is presented as follows:

although Kafka's works appear to present universal meanings in everyday events, the universal can no longer be translated unequivocally into philosophical, theological, sociological, or other commonly accepted discourses. Kafka's universal is the totality of all concrete phenomena and conceptual possibilities of human life, but without metaphysical ground or transcendence. Thus

all his fictional statements and images can be interpreted only in their ambiguous function within the structure of the texts and do not carry an absolute meaning in themselves (263).

Notable critics such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Günter Anders, Wilhelm Emrich and Roland Barthes have voiced, under various terminological guises, the core idea that in Kafka the symbol never refers univocally to an underlying concept and I have argued in the foregoing that Sartre is part of this tradition.

Indeed, in order to convey the aspect of ignorance inherent in an individual existence Sartre stresses the essentially allusive nature of literary language. This notion already informs *What is Literature?*, despite its rigid distinction between novelistic and poetic language: an uncertain boundary that great literature, according to Sartre, retains. A related concern is at work in Beauvoir's contention that she and Sartre perceived at once that one should not read *The Trial* as allegory, while seeing that Kafka's work expresses and thereby critiques a totalitarian world view. Rather than an exercise of 'translation' between symbol and content Kafka's novel evokes a longing for closure on the part of the reader which is, however, constantly thwarted. This aspect of Kafka's work, in Sartre's interpretation, goes hand in hand with the modernist twist Kafka gives to the conventions of the fantastic. Particularly in the last two novels, Kafka's protagonists are subjected to an all-compassing logic that encloses them in a novelistic universe as much as it does the reader. This anti-allegorical stance can be explained in formal terms¹⁶ but is grounded in a conception of the shifting connection between existential experience and literary expression. Speaking of Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*, Beauvoir asserts that "[he] offers [his] original experience in its dramatic singularity" and she goes on to show that the same holds true for Kafka, whose work expresses a thought which "cannot, without contradiction, be expressed in a categorical manner". Hence,

[...] the novel is the sole form of communication possible for Kafka, since he wishes to portray the drama of man confined in immanence. To speak of the transcendent, if only to say that it is inaccessible, would already be claiming to have some access to it. An imaginary account, on the other hand, allows us to respect this silence that is one appropriate to our ignorance (*Literature and Metaphysics* 274).

This in itself is cause for a reconsideration of the alleged paradigm break that occurred during the 1960s. But the difference between an allegorical and an allusive reading, elaborated through the concept of a metaphysical novel and in subsequent writings on literature, also points to wider issues. I have shown elsewhere that the universality of the literary work, of which Kafka in postwar France would have been a prototypical example, is a false construction that misses the dynamics of the particular and the universal described by Sartre on account of literature.¹⁷ Rather than Sartre's existentialism it was Camus's philosophy of the absurd, and specifically his well known article *Hope and the Absurd in the work of Franz Kafka*, that turned the Prague author into an ahistorical and universal figure. In a fateful critical sleight of hand, Robert's work would take Sartre to task rather than Camus—entirely absent from her critique—for this blind spot in Kafka's French reception. This was a strange accusation to level against Sartre, who after all, had consistently addressed the political context of his own writing ever since his turn to commitment.

The prevailing argument against the existentialist Kafka—examined here in one aspect only—was misdirected in a similar manner. A fuller reconsideration¹⁸ would show that for Sartre, Kafka is an author of the fantastic rather than the absurd. In fact, Sartre situates Kafka historically and politically, in order to understand the relation between the singularity of his existential experience and the literary means he used. Hence, for Sartre and Beauvoir the Prague author is neither allegorical, nor merely philosophical or universal, but rather, as Kafka's aphorism put it, a writer who grasped the "back and forth between the general and the universal" in new and unique ways.

Taken together this *Umwertung aller Werte* points to the overall and critically different significance of Kafka to Sartrean existentialism. This significance, I suggest, lies less in Kafka's support of standard account of Sartre's existentialism, and more in his importance as a writer who breaks open the rigid categories of the free subject, bringing Sartre's openness to alterity to light. Kafka plays a major role for thinkers who sought to dismantle the reigning phenomenological conception of the subject and substituted for it a (post-)structuralist analysis of man's alienation from the language he speaks and the social structure of which he is a part. This tradition showed that Kafka supports a deconstruction of the notion of the subject on which Sartre's thought rests. Such formidable thinkers as Adorno and Derrida have therefore hailed Kafka as an *alternative* to Sartre's subjectivism. According to the latter, in his critique of Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, authenticity designates an assured self-designation, which is irreconcilable with the notion of situation. The irresolvable tension between one's choice of self and the determination of the other led Derrida to posit an « oscillation indécidable » as a model of (his) Jewish self-understanding, referring to Kafka's 'Other Abraham' as an exemplary model of this *indécidabilité*. In a similar vein, Adorno argued that choice in (an extreme) situation, which is the crux of Sartre's committed writings, misses the profound point in Kafka: namely that one should not confuse paper-doll leaders and the voluntarist subject with the objective course of history whose anonymous machinery crushes the individual. Though at first glance Sartre's subject-oriented philosophy appears as irreconcilable with Kafka's modernism, the multitude of references to Kafka in Sartre's work, including those concerning the relation between literary language and (philosophical) 'thought', suggest that the French philosopher's work is intimately related to the alterity of a subject that Kafka had already introduced to his project, hence to a different reading of the period in which it begins.

Notes

¹ In fact, it is Alexandre Vialatte – Kafka's first translator in France – who first addressed this issue in a preface to the *Le procès* (see Schmeling "Das 'offene Kunstwerk' in der Übersetzung. Zur Problematik der französischen Kafka-Rezeption" 297).

² See Halfmann for a reevaluation of what he considers to be the myth of Kafka's obscurity.

³ This process of naturalization may be deemed characteristic of the French reception of foreign literature in general. It should also be related to the fact that Kafka was mostly read in translation. All Kafka translations until the '60s (with the notable exception of Robert herself) were carried out in the tradition of 'les belles infidèles' which adapted the foreign text to meet the structure of the French language and the expectations of the French reading public. Moreover, the existing translations (in particular those of Alexandre Vialatte) tended to acquire theological and metaphysical connotations that are not present in Kafka's text. Despite this inclination towards the metaphysical, however, translation does not seem to have been of principal importance in explaining the metaphysical interpretation since the German reception roughly follows the same pattern.

⁴ All unattributed translations are mine.

⁵ Interestingly, as Dietz (95) shows, the early reception of Kafka by literary authors such as Döblin, Mann, Musil and Hesse already prefigures the resistance to univocal interpretation that would only be developed in the 'official' Kafka scholarship during the '60s. Moreover, the view presented here does not hold for such original thinkers as Adorno, Benjamin, Anders and Arendt.

⁶ Roman Halfmann (13) among others, regards "Albert Camus und Jean-Paul Sartre, de[n]"

Existentialismus also, [als] markante Vertreter [einer aneignenden Umdeutung], denn ähnlich wie auch im Surrealismus *wird Kafkas Werk hier konsequent den eigenen Vorstellungen und Theorien angepasst* (my emphasis)".

⁷ See Robert 1961 and its various republications in 1971, 1973, 1979 and 1984. Ironically, Robert herself is not free from the kind of analysis that she opposes, since her attempt to bring interpretation closer to the biography of Kafka leads her to resort to the same kind of metaphorical readings that she denounces in earlier 'philosophical' interpretations. As Deleuze and Guattari assert, "Marthe Robert reminds us that the Jews are *like* dogs or, to take another example, that "since the artist is treated as someone starving to death Kafka makes him into a hunger artist; or since he is treated as a parasite, Kafka makes him into an enormous insect" (Deleuze and Guattari 95).

⁸ See Beicken *Franz Kafka* 42; Nayhauss; Halfmann; Dietz 97; Schmeling "Das "offene Kunstwerk" in der Übersetzung. Zur Problematik der französischen Kafka-Rezeption" 303; Lauterbach; David and Morel 168; Cusa and Cambreleng 72-3.

⁹ See Derins "Une conférence de J-P Sartre" and Revel "Les conférences "Kafka" par Jean-Paul Sartre". A manuscript of Sartre's Kafka lecture appeared in a new edition of the series *Situations* when the publication of this article was in its final stages. However this important publication in no way changes the argument presented here. For an extended contextualisation of Sartre's lecture on Kafka see Bogaerts "A different Sartre?" and "A propos de la conférence 'Kafka, écrivain juif'".

¹⁰ Compare also *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* 276; Beauvoir "Littérature et métaphysique" 1162. For the English version, see Beauvoir "Literature and Metaphysics" 276.

¹¹ It has to be noted, however, that Sartre and Camus also favorably reviewed each other's work.

¹² For an extended discussion of the concept and the relations between Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot see Bogaerts ("Beauvoir's Lecture").

¹³ Compare also Beauvoir's assertions that "the way in which Kafka narrates events, or Proust's phrases or the Joycean monologue intérieur, well, in all these cases the material they use, the way in which they use it and the search they conduct and that constitutes [...] their literary work are absolutely inseparable" ("Untitled contribution" 65).

¹⁴ Their rejection of the 'new novel' *écriture* is notable in this regard, for example in the above mentioned debate *What can Literature do?* (1965) which opposed representatives of existentialism to those of the new movement such as Jean Ricardou and Jean-Pierre Faye.

¹⁵ This is the first French publication of a text based on Sartre's contribution to the 1962 Moscow Peace Conference published in for the first time in Italian in *Rinascita* (13 octobre 1962).

¹⁶ See Sartre's 1943 analysis in which he compares Blanchot's Aminadab to Kafka's *The Castle* and defines a 'humanistic' turn to the genre of the fantastic at the beginning of the 20th century: in its last stage the fantastic recognizes man as a fantastic being because he is imbued with the unfathomable character that before had been attributed to a mysterious natural world.

¹⁷ See Bogaerts ("Sartre, Kafka, and the Universality of the Literary Work").

¹⁸ I have pursued this full-fledged examination in my dissertation. Part of the argument presented in this conclusion is worked out in reference to Sartre's 1947 lecture on Kafka. See Bogaerts "A different Sartre?"

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