

## GOLEMS, SCRIBES, AND TZADDIKS: FRANZ KAFKA'S PARABOLIC PAPERWORK



“He was, after all, by now well able to play on this departmental machinery, this delicate instrument always tuned for some compromise or other. The art of it lay essentially in doing nothing, leaving the machinery to work by itself and forcing it to work by the mere fact of oneself being there, irremovable in one's ponderous mortality.”

~~Franz Kafka, a deleted passage from *The Castle* (425)

**A**ugust, 1908, one of those stifling Prague summers, and the reception room at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia is a sauna of flattery and anxiety. A junior clerk, one of the Institute's two token Jews—a tall, spectral young man, pale as his collar, with soulful grey eyes and a mellifluous, if ironic, voice—is making the introductions at the welcome party for the Institute's new director, Dr. Robert Marschner. Marschner recognizes him as Franz Kafka, a former insurance student from the Prague Institute of Technology.

Despite the pleasant smiles, everyone understands the grimness of the situation. The Institute has become a money pit for the Hapsburg Empire, beset by bureaucratic inefficiency, a yawning deficit, graft, embezzlement, and malfeasance. It will take a Hercules to clean this Augean stable. But the conclusion of Kafka's toast is confident and upbeat:

Complaints against our organization, both justified and unjustified, have piled up in the course of the years. One thing can henceforth be taken for granted: we shall do good work. Whatever may be useful or necessary by way of reform, within the bounds of existing laws, will be done. Herr Director, we pledge ourselves to you! (quoted in Pawel 184).

Impressed with Kafka's speech, Marschner has it printed in the Institute's newsletter.

This image of Kafka the organization man and public relations agent clashes with the more traditional picture of Kafka the alienated artist and secular mystic. Typically, Kafka is

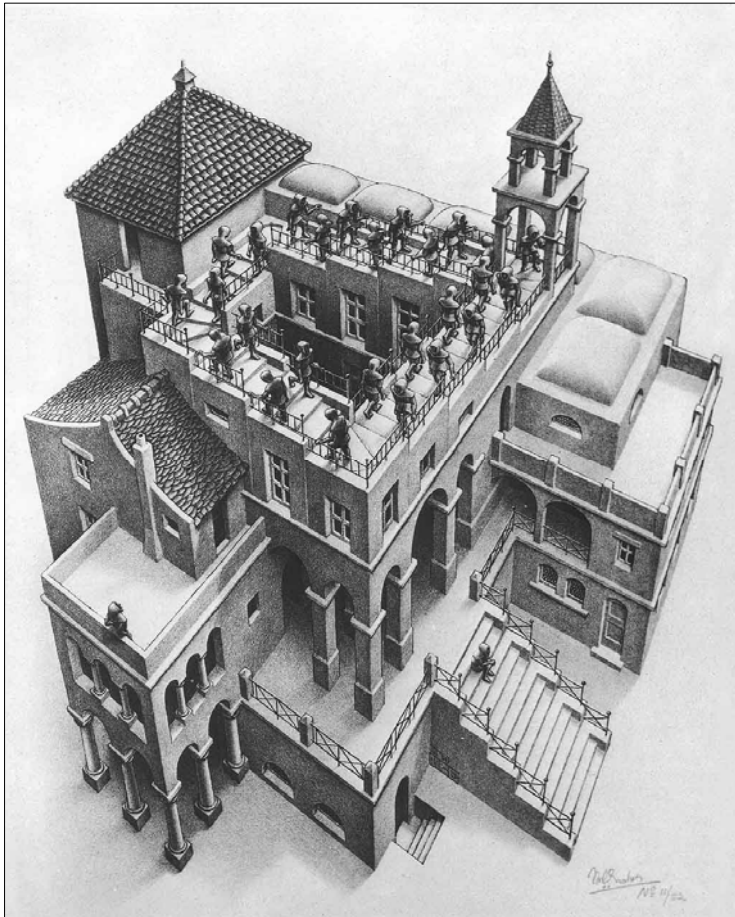
depicted as a dysfunctional schlemiel, a Yeshiva boy at the mercy of wolves, whose position at the Institute was the bitterest twist of fate. Kafka himself, with his talent for self-hatred, perpetuated this myth. The fact remains, however, that Kafka was a zealous and efficient bureaucrat, a master of office politics and a shrewd negotiator. During his fourteen years with the Institute, he distinguished himself as a superb technical writer and an innovator in industrial reform, factory safety, and corporate communications. Proud of his office work, Kafka circulated his company reports and proposals among Max Brod and the other literati of the Klub Mladých, and even submitted them to *Hyperion*, a leading Czech journal.



Far from being degrading or pointless, Kafka's professional writing provided him with financial and emotional stability, developed the subjects, themes, and style of his fiction, and, most important, improved the working conditions and saved the lives of thousands of Czech factory workers. Taken as a whole, Kafka's *Amtliche Schriften*, his working papers—in their own quiet way—are perhaps as valuable as his great novels.

**K**afka began working at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute on July 30, 1908. Prior to this, despite a doctorate in jurisprudence from the University of Prague, he had moldered for two years at the Assicurazioni Generali, a shabby Italian insurance firm whose

main office was in Trieste. The pay was miserable (80 *kronen* a month), the hours long (8:00 AM to 6:30 PM, often with unpaid overtime), and the rules were as absurd as they were severe. For example, Kafka was required to sign an agreement that stated, among other things: ". . . with the exception of the directors and the department heads, no employee has the right to keep any object other than those belonging to the office under lock in the desk and files assigned for his use" (quoted in Baumer 52). Relief finally came when the father of a friend, Dr. Otto Příbram, a

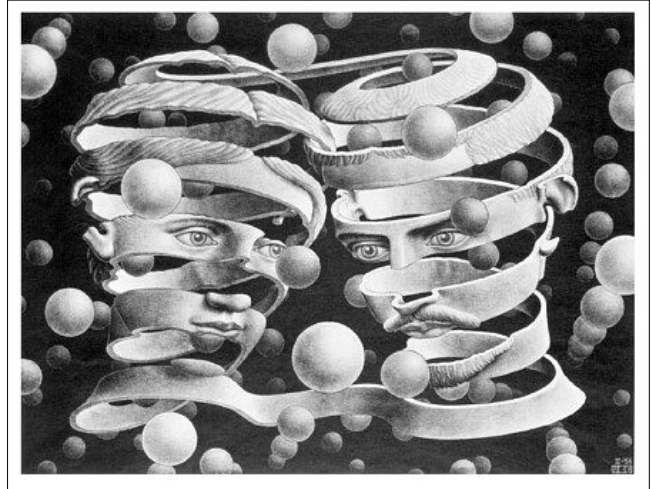


board member of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, found Kafka an entry-level position. Kafka was paid three *kronen* a day, plus a ten percent bonus, for a six-hour shift: 8:00AM to 2:00PM. This shorter work day gave him enough spare time to write at night.

At twenty-five, Kafka was the youngest clerk in the Institute, "the office baby," in the words of one colleague (quoted in Brod 82). Callow and precocious, he was

adored by almost everyone, from Director Marschner to the charwoman. Indeed, the Institute nurtured his self-esteem and validated his autonomy far more than his actual family. "He was appreciated by his subordinates as kindly and an understanding man," reports John Hibbend,

“and by his superiors as a person of intelligence who could be trusted and was particularly gifted at drawing up reports” (31). As his colleagues later told Max Brod, Kafka’s combination of intellectual brilliance and childlike modesty made him a man “incapable of earning enemies” (82), and surviving anecdotes testify to his popularity and winsomeness: Kafka’s providing lemons for a fellow clerk eating greasy food; his frequent gifts of flowers and candies to the cleaning staff; his



stimulating business luncheons with Marschner, at which they would recite Heine; his characteristic way of answering a knock with a gentle “Please!” (Janouch 18).

Kindness and naïveté, however, cannot explain Kafka’s relatively swift rise within the Institute. That we must attribute to ambition and to strong political ties to Marschner, his former teacher. These propelled him up the ladder. After an outstanding first year, Kafka was promoted. A year later, he was granted full civil servant tenure—unprecedented. Three years later, he was made Junior Secretary, then Full Secretary. Glowing reports accompanied his rise: “Exceptional faculty for conceptualization. Combines outstanding zeal with sustained interest in all assignments” (quoted in Pawel 186). Throughout World War I, Kafka—at the Institute’s request—was draft deferred as “essential” (188).

“*Indispensable!*” wrote Chief Inspector Eugene Pfohl, Kafka’s immediate supervisor, in 1917. “Without Kafka, the entire department would collapse!” (188, italics in original)

By the end of the war, Kafka was not only a Senior Secretary, he was de facto the Institute's most influential administrator after Marschner. Until illness forced his resignation in 1922, he played a major role in transforming the Institute into the most progressive, the most effective, the most solvent department in the Hapsburg Civil Service. Even after the Empire collapsed, the Institute functioned smoothly, mostly because of Kafka. When the young writer died in 1924, the entire Institute wore mourning for a month. Frau Svàtek, the charwoman, could not bring herself to clean out his desk.

Needless to say, no one can achieve this kind of power and influence, can inspire this kind of affection and loyalty, by being an ineffectual misfit. Although Kafka, in one sense, felt alienated at the Institute, in another sense, he was right at home. This prophet of future totalitarianism was also a specific representative of his own time, a member of an articulate, enlightened managerial class that was radically rethinking the nature and function of institutions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Richard Heinemann suggests, Kafka and Director Marschner worked so well together because both men were fascinated and influenced by the Weber brothers' theories about the dynamics of bureaucracies.



**A**ccording to Max Weber, bureaucracies derive their power from “a fundamental human predilection for order” (229). Operating through collective assent and serving collective

needs, they transcend the assent and needs of individuals—whether individual members of the public, or individual members of the bureaucracy itself. Under the right conditions and with the proper hierarchy, bureaucracies can remain perpetually self-functioning and self-regulating. Though committed to scientific rationalism, however, Weber was hardly a naïve positivist, and his model of bureaucracy admits, even insists on, the irrational dimension of the bureaucratic process. As expressions of the collective will, bureaucracies function as conduits for large, impersonal forces. “Under the guise of anonymity,” he concludes, in quasi-mystical language that prefigures Kafka’s fiction, “modern institutions have taken on the supernatural forces of the ancient gods” (Heinemann 257). Weber’s more activist brother, Alfred, with whom Kafka studied at the University of Prague, stated this problem more politically: Bureaucracies are always tempted to be mystified by their own power and become dysfunctional once they forget their social obligations.

Once we understand the ubiquity of Weberian bureaucratic theory in early 20th century Central Europe, Kafka's obsession with paperwork seems less like a peculiarity than an expression of a particular *Zeitgeist*. His description of a passport office, for instance, clearly echoes Max Weber: “Our fumbling interpretations,” Kafka writes to Oskar Baum, “are powerless to deal with the refinements of which bureaucracy was capable, and what is more, the necessary, inevitable refinements springing straight out of the origins of human nature, to which . . . bureaucracy is closer than any other institution” (quoted in Heinemann 256). The new scientific model of bureaucratic efficiency caused widespread concern and anxiety in Kafka’s time, not unlike present controversies surrounding computers, E-mail, and work-related privacy and communication. Then as now critics, such as Alfred Weber in his 1910 essay, “The

Bureaucrat," claimed that white-collar work was becoming dehumanized and impersonal, that the professional and civil classes were being transformed into a pack of passive and servile clerks, who were degrading themselves and betraying the public trust.

The problem of bureaucracy—and of bureaucratic language—was debated passionately at Café Arco and other Prague coffee houses between progressive civil servants and civic-minded literati. These fascinating discussions focused on power and language, on the material conditions of communication, on what happens when writing is mediated by a Byzantine hierarchy that cares only for its own agenda. That both professional and creative writers dialogued in this way is significant and points to an important fact: “the alliance between bureaucracy and literature has deep roots in German,” the official language of Bohemia at this time (Heinemann 259). Goethe, who served as an administrator in Weimar, is the primary example, of course, but so is Franz Grillparzer, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century dramatist with a distinguished career in the Austrian bureaucracy, whom Kafka in a 1919 diary entry calls his “prototype” (quoted in 260).



Given this context, Kafka’s unusual attitude toward, and appropriation of, his work-related writing becomes more comprehensible. Like many other Prague intellectuals, forced to work at the office, Kafka believed a dialectic was necessary between creative and professional writing to humanize the language

of institutions, and, as his letters to Felice Bauer testify, he consistently saw himself as a writer

who was both storyteller and bureaucrat. What distinguishes Kafka from his contemporaries, however, is his perspicacity. "Kafka saw what no one else could see," says Milan Kundera: "not only the enormous importance of the bureaucratic phenomenon for humanity, for our condition and for our future, but also (even more surprisingly) the poetic potential contained in the phantasmic nature of offices" (113).

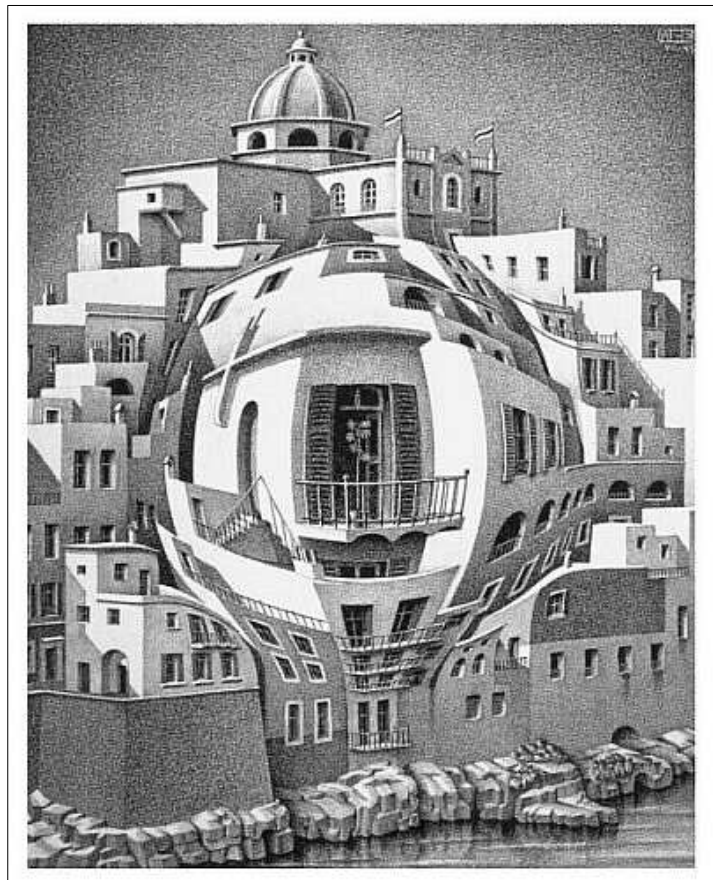
The *poetic potential* and, one should also add, the *moral opportunities*. This half-real world of Weberian bureaucracy, once thought to be a mere projection of Kafka's imagination but now the all too solid condition of our times, became Kafka's poetic and moral laboratory. For despite being a publicly loyal and efficient functionary, Kafka was a man with two private agendas, one creative, one ethical, who met both through his writing—not only his creative writing but his writing for the Institute itself. Hence the pun in this essay's subtitle: "Franz Kafka's *Parabolic Paperwork*." Kafka's professional writing not only formed the matrix for his parables of our Age of Anxiety, but functioned as a parabolic mirror—smooth, polished, distorting—behind which Kafka performed quiet but heroic acts of charity at the Institute's expense.

**F**ounded in 1889 as a concession to a growing and increasingly militant labor movement, the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute was ostensibly created to compensate injured laborers for on-site accidents. However, the Institute's real purpose was to deny workers compensation whenever possible, to use every bureaucratic means possible to save the Empire money. The magnitude of this doublethink created a staff of cynical and demoralized civil servants, 250 in all, whose only defense against absurdity and self-contempt was a carefully

cultivated sense of irony.

"[This] office is not a stupid institution," Kafka later told Milena Jesenká; "it belongs more to the realm of the fantastic than the stupid" (quoted in Kundera 113). Indeed, the Institute building itself, located on what is now Pořic Street, was more surreal than anything in Kafka's fiction. Behind a dingy Baroque exterior was a labyrinth of corridors, offices, committee chambers, and waiting rooms. Here groups of injured workers, a limping procession of cripples and amputees, would come to petition their case, assisted and bullied by the Institute's porter, a burly giant with a booming voice and a shovel-shaped beard, who must have been Kafka's model for the Doorkeeper in "Before the Law."

Dealing daily with such raw human suffering would be difficult even under the best conditions, but the Institute suffered from poor resources that made effective communication almost impossible. Cheap paper smeared type and made records illegible, files were in disarray, messengers unreliable, and the phone lines were so bad that mischievous



subordinates could impersonate their superiors to unsuspecting clients and colleagues. Face to face communication between resentful and overworked clerks was no less maddening, a string of

stealth attacks and face-saving non sequiturs.

The Pinteresque exchange between Kafka and a despicable office manager in the Steven Soderbergh film *Kafka* (1992) supposedly is based on an actual event—a messenger dressing down a junior clerk for delivering a file to the Institute's archives without giving it to him. Herr Treml, Kafka's senior office mate, an unpleasant frog-faced man with "urine-colored lifeless hair," also practiced this kind of syntactical hazing (Janouch 18). "He seemed to realize Kafka's dislike," observes eyewitness Gustav Janouch, "and so spoke to him, both on official and personal matters, with a sarcastic, man-of-the-world smile playing on his thin lips" (19).

Kafka studied this shark tank from his office, a medium-sized, rather high room, "with something of the dignified elegance of [a] senior partner's [office] in a prosperous firm of solicitors, and furnished in the same style," but crammed with shelves of law and reference books (Janouch 18). Accessible through a narrow corridor lined with ceiling-high filing cabinets, Kafka's chambers also had a set of black, polished double doors that opened on a vista of the Institute's other offices. Looking up from his work, Kafka was confronted time and again with the failures of institutional language—copyists tearing their hair over a blot, clerks arguing pedantically about the appropriateness of a phrase, petitioners, unable to understand rules and regulations, pounding the desk in frustration. Institutional language, he concluded, was not a direct channel for communicating ideas but an indirect medium for aggression and submission, a matter of power, hierarchy, and protocol, not meaning, and it victimized everyone.

Kafka sympathized with his colleagues' struggles with the language of bureaucracy, but he was far more concerned with the illiterate and semi-literate workers who had submitted themselves to that language for justice. This devotion toward his clients expressed itself

primarily in scrupulosity toward language, the result of Kafka's legal training and his position as a German-speaking Jew in colonized Bohemia. As we shall see, this dual background gave Kafka a unique insight into the tension and contradictions between the written word and the law.

**K**afka probably was not the white-collar Hasid in Gustav Janouch's hagiography, *Conversations with Kafka*, but he was mindful of Jewish teaching and legend concerning the written word. In part, he saw himself as a kind of secular *sofer* or scribe, a cherished calling within traditional Judaism but one burdened with heavy responsibility and fraught with terrifying peril. According to certain rabbinical scholars, writing—a most sacred activity in Judaism—always borders on blasphemy, always risks violating the first commandment, because it can forget that it is only a representation of God's Law, not the Law itself. Even the holiest sage could succumb to this temptation, as Kafka well knew. After all, he had grown up in the Prague ghetto, the birthplace of the fabled Golem—a clay monster animated by the writing on his forehead.



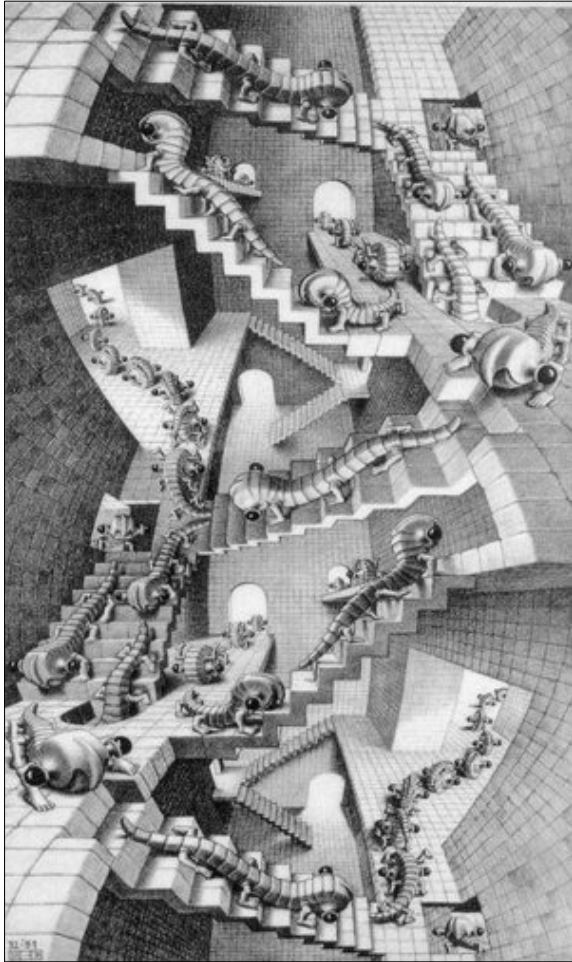
According to legend, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel had fashioned this creature in the late 16th century to protect the Jewish community and to perform heavy manual labor. After sculpting the Golem from earth, Rabbi Loew activated it by tracing on its brow the Hebrew word for truth, *Ameth*. To deactivate it, Rabbi Loew merely erased the first letter to form the Hebrew

word for death, *Meth*. Despite this fail-safe, the Golem broke free of Lowe's control and ran amuck. Rabbi Lowe was forced to kill it and stored its bulk in the spooky Altneu Synagogue. Kafka often passed this landmark on his way to work.

Working in a hierophantic bureaucracy that assumed a Godlike authority, Kafka saw the wisdom in traditional rabbinical injunctions against writing. Writing, particularly institutional writing that becomes self-serving, self-referential, and self-perpetuating, can never serve justice, whether divine or human. The Word is not the same as the Law. In a revealing moment in "The Penal Colony," the officer holds up a scribbled piece of paper for the explorer's perusal. According to the officer, this indecipherable scrawl reads: "BE JUST!" (219). Significantly, the instrument of torture in this story is a device that writes a literal death sentence on the body of the condemned. Such mechanized violence, Kafka reasoned, is merely the logical conclusion of a bureaucratic model of writing that privileges the abstract over the concrete, that confuses sign with signifier and commits the idolatry of logocentrism. This insight would become the major theme of Kafka's fiction. "In the Kafkan world," remarks Milan Kundera, "the file takes on the role of the Platonic idea. It represents true reality, whereas our physical existence is only a shadow cast on the screen of illusion" (102). When files become more real than clients, clients become mere fictions—creatures with predetermined identities and limited autonomy who are made and unmade by writing. In other words, golems.

Long before Foucault, then, Kafka as a sensitive bureaucrat saw how institutions can create dehumanizing language systems that scar and oppress its users. Functioning as a machine and a template, such language reshapes human consciousness until it is only functional. That is why Kafka's characters are largely functionaries, white-collar workers who exploit, and are

exploited by, professional writing. Sometimes the enormity of this situation made Kafka feel



utterly powerless and worthless. "I'm just a bit of waste matter and not even that," Kafka confessed to Gustav Janouch. "I don't fall under the wheels but only into the cogs of the [organizational] machine, a mere nothing in the glutinous bureaucracy of the Accident Insurance Institution"(169).

But behind this self-abjection was the determination of a saboteur. If institutional language was a gigantic machine, words still could be used like monkey wrenches, and Kafka had the talent, will, and authority to overhaul the works. "Far from being a nameless cog in a giant engine running amuck," Ernst Pawel declares, "he

was from the very beginning in decision-making positions and contributed his share toward a significant reduction of crippling and fatal accidents in Bohemia's major industries" (189).

Through his on-the-job writing, often humorous and subversive, Kafka humanized the Institute by tricking it into honoring its mission statement.

For years after his death, and long before his international reputation as a novelist and short story writer was established, the Institute kept Kafka's work papers, his memos, proposals, feasibility and site inspection reports, press releases, and brochures, on file as samples—a

mother lode of documents, for both Kafkalogists and professional writing scholars, that remains largely unmined because it has not been translated. Even a cursory glance at this material shows why Director Marschner considered Kafka invaluable to the Institute. As Ernest Pawel notes, Kafka's professional writing, "often highly technical in nature, combines an astonishing grasp of abstruse detail with a lucidity of presentation seldom encountered in writing of this sort, least of all in German" (186). With his interest in science and law, Kafka was particularly gifted in explaining industrial process to and summarizing complicated insurance law for a lay audience.

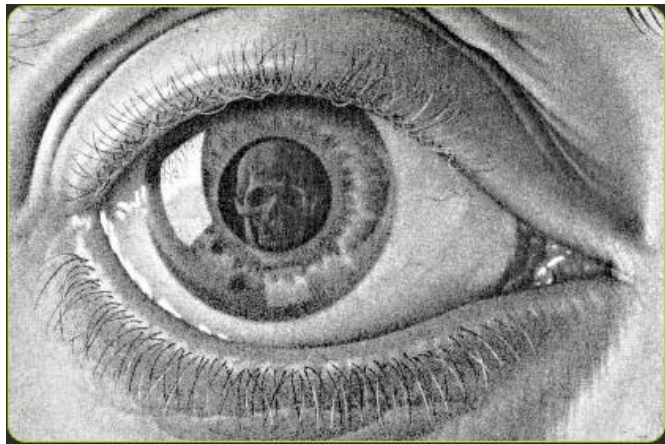
Kafka's writing talents could not have been more needed or more welcome. He had joined the Institute at a time of radical restructuring, one that placed heavy demands on internal and external communications. "Despite his youth and inexperience," states Ronald Hayman, "he was entrusted with writing in the bulletin for 1907-08 on compulsory insurance in the building trade and on motor insurance. He was soon transferred to another department concerned with the protection of workers against accidents. This involved him in writing a great many reports" (69). Marschner admired his protégé's astonishing facility with language, for he himself, although intelligent, cultivated, and articulate, was not a particularly good writer, and he used Kafka to ghost write his more important administrative documents. With Kafka as his scribe, Ernst Pawel recounts, Marschner completely transformed the Institute and its way of doing business:

Marschner quickly put into place a whole new system of controls, from internal audits to the rigorous investigation of suspect claims. Premiums were adjusted to reflect varying risk factors in different industries, and routine checks on employees, along with gentle persuasion or threats of legal sanction, dramatically raised the level of compliance with the law and, not incidentally, the institute's annual premium income. At the same time Marschner initiated what was to become a progressive innovation in the field—a heavy stress on the institute's active and systematic involvement in occupational safety measures and in the prevention of industrial accidents, which, with the rapid mechanization of the workplace, had become rampant. (185)

Kafka's writing got results because it so blatantly differed from the flaccid prose for

which the Institute had become notorious. Clear, legible, elegant, funny, it broke all the rules of bureaucratese. Kafka told the truth, even when it was unflattering, and he used the Institute's actual mistakes, rather than its bogus achievements, to reestablish a good working relationship with the public. His 1911 annual report contains moments of deadpan humor that foreshadows his short story, "A Report to the Academy," in which a gorilla makes an acceptance speech at a German University. Here Kafka discusses the Institute's deficit:

We readily concede that the Institute's annual reports up to now, with their figures documenting a downright organic growth of the deficit, offered scant reason for enthusiasm. On the contrary, these reports succeeded in scuttling all hopes for the future of this Institute, which seemed to resemble nothing so much as a dead body sprouting an ever-proliferating deficit as its sole surviving limb, not unlike a turnip patch growing in the middle of a cemetery. Now that Dr. Marschner is in charge, things have started to change. However, nothing short of broad-based public support can make sure these promising changes will become permanent. (quoted in Pawel 185)



To win this "broad-based public support," Kafka kept close ties with the papers, using any excuse to generate publicity. When some of Marschner's initial reforms failed, Kafka made this seem like a positive thing in a press release:

All innovation, even the most enlightened, contains some puerile inanities. For instance, we have urged our employees to view the Institute's exhibit of safety devices—which, by our count, contains a total of six items. Silly, no doubt; yet this, too, is something to be grateful for. After all, how often in the past has the Prague Institute offered the public a chance to laugh at its excess of youthful zeal? (quoted in Pawel 186)

But Kafka's main duties were no laughing matter. He headed the Institute's "pioneer venture into aggressive accident prevention" (Pawel 187). Marschner's confidence in the young

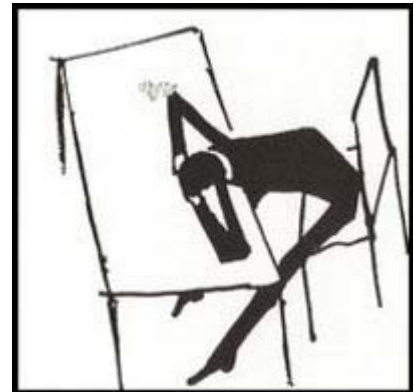
man's abilities must have been absolute, because "it is unlikely that this hard-driving and immensely competent executive would have picked a man who had struck him as an unworldly and fumble-fingered dreamer for a challenging new assignment on which he had staked so much of his reputation" (187). Fluent in Czech as well as German, Kafka would inspect factories throughout Northern Bohemia, where working conditions resembled something out of an infernal Charlie Chaplin film.

"In my four district headquarters," Kafka wrote Max Brod, "people fall, as if they were drunk, off scaffolds and into machines, all the planks tip up, there are landslides everywhere, all the ladders slip, everything one puts up falls down and what one puts down one falls over oneself" (87). Even worse were the young women in chinaware factories who fell down stairs with huge stacks of dishes in their arms—sometimes accidentally, sometimes to induce a miscarriage. The shattering china gave Kafka splitting headaches.

These workers were injured as much by the "vagaries of the workplace" as "badly planned machinery," and Kafka was almost more appalled by their emotional and mental state as their physical pain (Karl 223). Bewildered to the point of numbness by incomprehensible technology and instructions, they had become passive and dehumanized, soulless drudges, and in this industrial setting the figure of the Golem from Jewish folklore more and more resembled in Kafka's imagination another fantastical automaton: Karel Čapek's robot. ("Robot" itself is derived from Czech word for drudgery, *robota*.) Although most of these accident victims were anti-Semites, Kafka was still determined to help them. Everything depended on his reports. However enlightened Marschner was, Kafka knew he could not directly appeal to his superior's feelings. Marschner, a Weberian positivist, disliked emotional rhetoric. Instead, Kafka had to

document, clearly, objectively, unemotionally, that a worker was not at fault in an accident. While the reports of other inspectors made an issue of a worker's character, Kafka's reports, much like his fiction, eschewed character and documented process and conditions.

**T**he following is an excerpt from a report on a saw mill accident, partly written "to show the difference between square spindles and cylindrical spindles as it affects the techniques for the prevention of accidents" (quoted in Brod 83). Kafka had audited courses in engineering and draftsmanship at the Prague Institute of Technology and effectively uses that knowledge in this report. He carefully describes the cutter—a square spindle whose cutters "are connected by means of screws directly to the spindle and rotate with exposed [teeth] at speeds of 380 to 400 revolution per minute"—and reinforces his argument with anatomical illustrations of missing finger joints (83).



But the most striking thing about the report is its prose. The same qualities that distinguish Kafka's fiction, such as "In the Penal Colony"—hyper-acute perceptivity, an almost pedantic thoroughness, a sharp eye for minute details, an ability to make the horrible seem commonplace in simple and precise language—are all present here:

An extremely cautious worker could probably take care not to allow any joint of his fingers to project over the lumber either during the work or while moving the wood away from the cutter head, but caution is irrelevant to the major danger. Even the most careful worker must be drawn into the cutter space area when it slips or when the lumber is thrown back, as it happens quite often, when he is pressing the piece he is planing with one hand against the machine-table, and with the other feeding it to the cutter spindle. It is impossible either to foresee or to prevent that wood from riding and sliding back, for this would occur when the wood was gnarled or knotty in particular places, when the blade was not moving fast enough, or moved itself out of position or

when the pressure on the wood was unevenly distributed. Such accidents would occur rarely without the amputation of several finger joints or even whole fingers. (quoted in Karl 223)

Kafka made such a strong case in report after report that the Institute willingly, gladly, awarded generous compensations. Other inspectors, eager to emulate Kafka, followed suit, and eventually, the Institute began paying workers on a regular basis. One would think that consistently finding against his own organization, and teaching others to do likewise, would have made Kafka a pariah, but nothing could be further from the case. Kafka always used finesse, "discovering honorable ways to lose a case" and letting the Institute batten on the good publicity (Karl 222). In a sense, his actions merely reinforced and legitimized the Institute's actual mission. Kafka was more interested in creating good authority than flouting bad authority, and he always remained loyal, in his way, to the organization that he served. According to Gustav Janouch's father, who worked with Kafka at the Institute, if Kafka had deliberately torpedoed the Institute's case in court, he would pay the plaintiff's legal expenses out of his own pocket.

Kafka's first loyalty, however, always lay with the public and with proper communication. He used his formidable gifts to produce safety materials—flyers, instructions, brochures, manuals, all written in clear, accessible prose—to *prevent* accidents as well as deal with them. Through aggressive public education, Kafka made certain "not only that the law was followed but that it was known" (Karl 222). Working this way for some fifteen years, Kafka helped thousands of families and saved hundreds of lives. After his death, the relatives of those workers whom Kafka had benefitted—some of whom, tragically, would die at the hands of the kind of evil bureaucracy Kafka had spent his entire professional life combating—regularly placed

flowers on his grave; and most of them had never heard of, much less read *The Metamorphosis*.

**W**hich brings me to a conclusion and a question: Can one argue that Kafka's professional writing, which he produced anonymously, is just as valuable, on its own terms, as the creative writing that bears his name?

Fifteen years ago, that wasn't a serious issue in the Academy. Now, with changing definitions of canonicity and textuality, it is. Struggling to find a moral balance between his creative and professional writing, Kafka himself asked this question. Although anguished by the Modernist split between art and life, he never truly subscribed to it. As he confided to Gustav Janouch, "Kierkegaard [asks] . . . whether to enjoy life aesthetically or to experience it ethically. But this seems to me a false statement of the problem. . . . In reality, one can achieve an aesthetic enjoyment of life only as a result of humble ethical experience" (81).

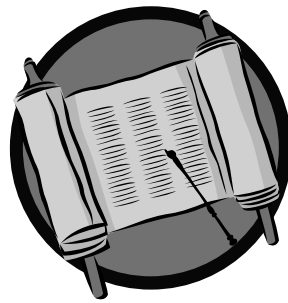
Kafka's Judaism probably provided him with this perspective. Growing up, he often had



heard stories about the *tzaddiks*, the Jewish saints, particularly the Lamedvoniks, the thirty-six righteous souls whose holiness keeps the universe from flying apart but whose identity remains unknown. They are not canonized like the Christian saints. Instead, they are ordinary, anonymous: God's civil servants. Stern, the accountant—another master of righteous paperwork—near the conclusion of

*Schindler's List* (1993) quotes the Talmud: "He who saves one life saves the entire universe."

That cannot be said of most great writers, but it can be said of Franz Kafka. "That man was no lawyer," blurted one grateful worker to Gustav Janouch's father, "he was a saint!" (quoted in 66). An office *tzaddik*? A self-deprecating skeptic without a sentimental bone in his ectomorphic body, Kafka would have winced at this suggestion. Even so, may this scribe's name be written in the BOOK OF LIFE.



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