The Kafka Case:
Constructing Kafka, Deconstructing the Self in French Letters

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2010

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation studies the presence and importance of Franz Kafka’s writing in French letters of the twentieth century. Though born in Prague and a speaker of German, Kafka’s work has been instrumental to many French thinkers, and I study three in particular: Marthe Robert, Maurice Blanchot, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. I analyze the critical writings of Robert and Blanchot, as they are two of the most comprehensive and prolific writer’s on Kafka. Their theoretical writings will in turn be used to read and reevaluate the novels Dans le labyrinthe by Robbe-Grillet and Aminadab by Blanchot.

This project may be divided into three parts. The first part consists of two chapters and relies on the critical work of Marthe Robert. In her career, she wrote three books devoted entirely to Kafka, and a cycle of four books which reference his writing with great frequency. In her criticism, several themes reappear that treat genre, the conventions of the novel, and the dualities that writers face between living their life, and crafting their art. In the light of her critical oeuvre, the second chapter uses Robert’s insights to read two novels that belong to a Kafkaesque tradition. In Dans le labyrinthe and Aminadab, I examine genre, rhetoric, and the problematic nature of interpretation.

The second part consists of two chapters that rely on the critical work of Maurice Blanchot. Though he never wrote an entire book-length study devoted to Kafka’s text, Blanchot has written many articles that are dependent on Kafka. He studies the language of literature, the problems of commentary and interpretation, and the unique positioning
of the author, who, alienated from him or herself, experiences a movement from *je* to *il*.

The survey of Blanchot’s critical work is used to reexamine *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*, and to use the novels as illustrations for some of Blanchot’s abstract ideas.

The third part of this dissertation treats questions of selfhood and subjectivity. Writers who have discussed Kafka also exhibit a common interest in questions of subjectivity. This thematic, which is present in the entire project, is discussed at length in the fifth chapter, with the aid of Claude Morali’s *Qui est moi aujourd’hui?* This chapter analyzes how the discourse of subjectivity is related to childhood, a theme common to Kafka and the three French writers whom I have chosen. I conclude by questioning whether childhood may be used as a metaphor to help frame the questions I have studied regarding reading, writing, and the interpretation of literature.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to praise the unwavering encouragement I received from Meghan, Jacob, Jennifer, and Charlie. They read my chapters, offered suggestions and corrections, and admirably blended patience with impatience regarding my at times intractable writing. And this says nothing of their invaluable friendship, support, and care.

I would like to thank my parents for their enthusiasm, pride, and perspective.

I appreciate the efforts of my committee members Professors Racevskis, Willging, and Holland. I would also like to recognize the Professors who opened their doors to me and advised me about the writing process, the difficulty of Blanchot, or the rigors of academic life: Professors Armstrong, and Grinstead.

I would like to acknowledge those with whom I studied, conversed, gossiped, dined, opined, and whined: Kevin, Comrade Lina, Belly, Woody, Anita, Jenny, Sébastien, and Matthieu. I would also like to recognize all the friends, students, faculty, and professors with whom I have interacted in my six years in Columbus. Lastly, I am grateful to the Department of French and Italian and The Ohio State University for supporting me, challenging me, and trusting me with this unorthodox project.
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INTRODUCTION

French Constructions of Kafka

Mythological figure and figurative martyr, Franz Kafka has become such an integral part of the French literary imagination that a naïve reader could easily be convinced that this Prague writer was in fact Parisian born—a French-speaking author in the tradition of Voltaire, Balzac, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Hugo. The French literati have adopted Kafka into their own tradition and made of him a new figure—an author so divorced from his true origins and actual place that he has become little more than a myth, an analogy used by a given writer to help represent their own theories. To Camus he was an absurdist; to Sartre he was a fantasist; to Breton a surrealist; to Gide and Barrault an easy allegory for the war years; to Deleuze and Guattari the embodiment of minor literature; to Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute he was a nouveau romancier. To many literary historians he is the logical extension of Hugolian romanticism, Flaubertian artistry, or Rimbaudian poetics.

Kafka was first translated into French in the 1930’s and his writings were censored during the occupation. After the war he became viewed as a *voyant*, a writer who had seen, predicted, perhaps even warned of the impending doom into which Europe was to sink during the Nazi years. After the war, Kafka’s writing was read as an allegory for the occupation, the Shoah, the human condition, the oedipal conflict, and humanity’s search for meaning in any of its iterations: God, Truth, Justice, Art, etc. Through these diverse and sometimes overly reductive offerings, a reader may be able to glean a picture of Kafka; it may be fractured, like a cubist portrait, but some distinct figure will shine through: the image of labyrinthine architecture and dark, enclosed spaces dominates. The bureaucratic nightmare of impossible-to-reach officials who control and yet remain indifferent to the individual destinies they manipulate are among the most familiar of the Kafkaesque themes. Other themes abound, such as erotic mischief, parental brutality, authoritarian abuses, animalistic fables, and of course an all pervasive humor. It is by studying these themes that we catch a glimpse, through a French prism, of the specter, the myth, the symbol that Franz Kafka’s has become.

Born in Prague to a Jewish family in 1883, Kafka was the only surviving son in a family of four children. The facts of Kafka’s life may seem banal compared to the depth and imagination of his texts and it must be noted that critics have left no element of his biography unstudied in a fervent attempt to offer the definitive explanation of what persist to be inconclusive novels, short stories, fables, letters, and journals. With the exception of various short stories,² most notably *The Metamorphosis* in 1915, the entirety

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of Kafka’s work was published posthumously. Kafka died on June 3, 1924 from tuberculosis of the throat. Each of the next three years saw the publication of one of his unfinished novels by his friend and literary executor Max Brod, with _The Trial_ (1925), _The Castle_ (1926), and lastly _Amerika_ (1927). Four years later, Brod also published a collection of short stories which included _The Great Wall of China_ (1931).

Though Kafka’s output may not be numerically great, he did write abundantly. He kept a diary, was a prolific letter writer, and burned many of his unfinished jottings. It is his private writing which has provided the fodder for numerous critical approaches, both disciplined and otherwise. Kafka’s biographers have expounded upon the most important elements of Kafka’s life. They mention his comfortable economic status in an assimilated Jewish family of Prague; his domineering father; his position as a German speaker in a Czech speaking country; his failed engagements; his introduction to Yiddish; his career, insomnia (and contradictorily abundant dreams), fasting, and his self-discipline which verged on asceticism. A lawyer by education, Kafka worked in the _Assicurazioni Generali_ insurance offices and wrote by night, often times passing entire evenings hunched over his desk. Critics frequently comment on the stark distinction in Kafka’s world between the life that he was constrained to live and the demands and hopes that he harbored in his world of writing.

Kafka’s life was not easy; he was chronically ill, an insomniac, and he was torn between his desire for marriage and his passion for literature. Many of these dilemmas in

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3 Marthe Robert expresses this disparity by the inverse relationship between its size on a library shelf and the possibilities of its meanings in _Seul, comme Kafka_.

4 Principle among biographers are Ernst Pawel ( _The Nightmare of Reason_), Max Brod ( _Franz Kafka: A Biography_), Ronald Hayman ( _A Biography of Franz Kafka_), Nicholas Murray ( _Kafka_), and in the French language Gérard-George Lemaire ( _Kafka_).
Kafka’s life can be tied to his complicated relationship with his father, a relationship which can be understood from the undelivered “Letter to His Father.” This letter, which Kafka gave to his mother, contains many of the complaints and grievances that Kafka harbored for a lifetime. His mother, wisely, according to most commentators, never handed this missive to his father, but the epistle lives on in the critical domain.5

The goal of this project is to trace the presence and to analyze the impact that Kafka’s writings have had on twentieth-century French novelists, critics, and literary theorists. We will consider the many ways in which French writers have used Kafka as a point of departure in their own work and the ways in which they interpret his work. Over the course of some 70 years Kafka’s work has made an impact on both novelists and critics and we would like to suggest that an image—perhaps a uniquely French image—has been constructed. It is a cubist image that is fractured with many parts that seem incongruent but at the same time it may be viewed as an understandable whole. Kafka has been read, explicated, translated, mistranslated, anthologized and even resurrected, as he was by Alain Bosquet in Un Détenu à Auschwitz (1991). In this play, Bosquet imagines Franz Kafka surviving his tuberculosis only to end up in a Nazi death camp.

The first French translation of Kafka’s La Métamorphose (1928) was made by Alaxandre Vialatte, who was also responsible for translating the novels Le Procès (1933), Le Château (1938), and L’Amérique (1946). Vialatte was not only the first principal French translator of Kafka but also the author of numerous essays, forewords, introductions, and prefaces, many of which are compiled in Kafka ou l’innocence

5 The “Letter to his Father” offers many of the details of Kafka’s life and provides grist for psychoanalytic readings of Kafka’s texts which remain one of the most persistent readings in Kafka studies, both in France and elsewhere.
diabolique (1998). Other translators of Kafka include Bernard Lortholary, Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, Claude David, Marthe Robert, Axel Nesme, and the numerous translators who have worked on his short stories.

A cursory look in a card catalogue will reveal no shortage of survey-style studies on Kafka in France. Maja Goth’s Franz Kafka et les lettres françaises (1956) is the first comprehensive survey of Kafka’s work in France. Marthe Robert’s Kafka (1960) is a study similar in scope. In Narrative Consciousness: Structure and Perception in the Fiction of Kafka, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet (1972), George Szanto offers an appendix that reviews these surveys in only five pages; twenty years later, Francoise Tabery wrote a similarly brief review (eight pages) in Kafka en France: essaie de bibliographie annotée (1991). Maja Goth’s text is important for being the first to group Kafka’s criticism and influence into easily digestible (if perhaps arbitrary) categories. She explores the surrealist assimilation of Kafka’s ideas and themes and how this group seems to have adopted him as one of their own. She then examines with various degrees of depth, a series of disparate authors including Henri Michaux, Maurice Blanchot, Samuel Beckett (another writer adopted into the French literary tradition), Camus, and finally Sartre. It is the chapters devoted to surrealism, Michaux, and Sartre that prove to be the most comprehensive and far-reaching, and these sections are thematically united. Goth devotes much of her text to proving how Kafka’s fantastic and dreamlike writing was inspirational to both the surrealists and Michaux; and it was Sartre who wrote about this oneiric streak in Kafka’s work relating it to Blanchot’s Aminadab. Goth’s text is not
one-dimensional by any means, but she does seem to treat a rather limited range of questions in her early yet essential study.

Marthe Robert’s *Kafka* (1960) surveys a wider range of texts than does Goth’s text. It offers a thorough biographical timeline of Kafka’s life, a title-by-title gloss of his texts, as well as a grouping of reflections about his work by intellectuals of the literary world. In *Kafka*, Robert privileges critical insight over adherence to a strictly historical survey, and this form sets the stage for many of her later books on Kafka. The chapter titles of her study—*l’art, l’imitation, les allusions, and le combat*—give the reader clues about what she will explore thematically in *L’Ancien et le nouveau*, and *Seul, comme Franz Kafka*. In her criticism of Kafka, Robert examines the gap between Kafka’s art and his life (an aspect he shares with Flaubert and others); she shows how Kafka’s texts seem to imitate or be superimposed over traditional genre tropes of the western canon, and she begins to explore the struggle that writing is for Kafka, how it becomes an obsession and necessitates the renunciation of important aspects of his life. These ideas are elaborated over a 25-year span, but we can see their nascent forms in this work.

Two surveys of Kafka’s work in France have been attempted by Szanto and Tabery. In addition to these studies that have contextualized Kafka criticism in France, there is Claudine Roboin’s *Kafka* (1973) which belongs to the *Critique de notre temps* series. In this text, Roboin introduces Kafka’s life and work before providing excerpts from articles about Kafka by prominent writers from France and the rest of the world. Included in these are the writings of well known French intellectuals such as André
Breton, Camus, Sartre, Claude-Edmonde Magny, Paul Claudel, Vialatte, Robert, Blanchot, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Starobinsky. This collection is valuable for its thorough purview of Kafka criticism. Though it makes no attempt to categorize, theorize, or interpret the wide range of writing from which it presents, it provides one of the best collections of criticism on Kafka in a single volume.

Other attempts to cover Kafka’s presence in France include two different volumes of *Le Magazine littéraire* (1983 and 2002), a special edition of *Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle* (2006), a *recueil* of criticism on *Le Château* (1984), and Stanley Corngold’s chapter on Kafka in *The Fate of the Self: German Writers and French Theory* (1994). Szanto’s 1971 appendix offers a concise review of the earlier movements in Kafka criticism in France, but a number of important contributions were published after his and after Tabery’s surveys. Chief among them are works by Robbe-Grillet (1961), Deleuze and Guattari (1974), Jacques Derrida (1985), Hélène Cixous (1989), Georges Perec (1973, 1992), and Bosquet’s previously mentioned play (1991). These more contemporary texts stand alongside other articles and book-length treatises on Kafka that have appeared in French letters including essays by Gide (1946), Sarraute (1947), Camus (1948), Bataille (1957), Roland Barthes (1960), Claude Mauriac (1958), Michel

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6 Magny’s article, from *Les sandales d’Empédocle* (1968), was important for both Robert and Blanchot.
7 Lesser known writers included in this text are Gaston Bachelard, Claude David, Daniel Biégel, Daneil Rops, and Roger Garaudy.
8 Though there is not a work solely devoted to Kafka in *Pour un nouveau roman*, Kafka appears frequently in the text, and we will discuss its relevance and importance in Chapter Three.
Carrouges (1962), Denis de Rougement (1964), Pierre de Boisdeffre (1973), Henri Meschonic (1973), and the many essays of Blanchot and Robert.\textsuperscript{10}

George Szanto cites a letter that Marthe Robert wrote to him in which she characterizes the French reception of Franz Kafka: “Kafka was adopted in France, virtually naturalized, like no other foreign writer ever was.”\textsuperscript{11} Robert’s insight is quite acute, for when the many critics that we have listed describe Kafka’s work, they use what we may call a vocabulary of French authors. For instance, when writing about Kafka, instead of placing him in a strictly Prague tradition,\textsuperscript{12} or even a German tradition, or a diverse international tradition with Dickens, Goethe, Heine, Kleist, and Flaubert—his avowed idols—French critics habitually place him in a tradition that includes Hugo, Rimbaud, Proust, and Pascal. It does appear, as Robert stated, that Kafka has been adopted, assimilated even, into a French literary heritage.

A complete list and study of the French treatment of Kafka is beyond the scope of this introduction. I would like, rather, to hint at the depth and richness of this field, and to show how certain problems will inevitably stand out. Chief among them are questions of interpretation concerning the relation between life and art, the writer’s craft, the self, and the connection to literary genres and traditions. Many critics, as we have mentioned, rely on reductive readings of Kafka, trying to explain his fiction through the psychological prism of his biography, or to account for his fiction by way of one-for-one symbolic

\textsuperscript{10} For a complete account of texts about Kafka and Kafka criticism in France, refer to the bibliography at the end of this project and to \textit{Kafka en France: essai de bibliographie annotée} by Tabéry. Robert and Blanchot’s contribution to Kafka studies will be explored in Chapters One and Three respectively.


\textsuperscript{12} I say Prague instead of Czech because Kafka belonged to a small circle of Prague writers set apart from the Czech tradition. They wrote in German and included such authors as Max Brod, Felix Weltsch, and after Kafka’s death, Ludwig Winder.
substitutions, such as the negative theological approach which claims that the goal of Kafka’s texts is to signal the absence of God and the absurdity of the human condition.

In Michel Foucault’s article “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” Franz Kafka is employed as an example of a man’s life and work being inexplicably intertwined. Foucault is not only criticizing the notion of authorship as it has been traditionally defined and employed, but seeking to develop new ways of reading, questioning individualization, and exploring subjectivity.¹³ His interrogation of the traditional author parallels similar trends in the writing of Barthes and Blanchot. What is more, another complication that Foucault raises in the status of the author is the commonly held belief, inherited from the Romantic tradition, of the work of art being the means through which an author may find immortality: “Voyez Flaubert, Proust, Kafka. Mais il y a autre chose: ce rapport de l’écriture à la mort se manifeste aussi dans l’effacement des caractères individuels du sujet écrivant.”¹⁴ Foucault’s approach in this instance will parallel what we discover in the critical writings of both Robert and Blanchot.

It is difficult to evaluate the extent of the French contribution to Kafka studies; I aim, rather, to trace the presence of Kafka across the landscape of French letters of the twentieth century. My principal subject then is the French reception of Kafka’s work, which manifests itself as the construction in France of a Kafka figure. My purpose is to study not Kafka the author, but the discourse French writers have elaborated around him. The three focal points around which this project will turn are the question of literary tradition, the question of interpretation, and the question of selfhood. It is the

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¹⁴ Ibid., 793.
representation and interpretation of Kafka, however, that will be the _fil conducteur_, in French writing, around which these important topics revolve. Exegesis, commentary, and explanation are not synonymous but they all reflect concerns with the process of reading and critiquing. These are elements which dominate the writing of Blanchot and Robert as well as the fiction of Robbe-Grillet. The importance of the question of selfhood becomes more and more apparent the more one reads French articles examining Kafka. It seems that writers who read, study, and comment upon Kafka are also those thinkers who are invested in questions of the self.

Questions of interpretation will dominate this study. My goal is not to offer a definitive interpretation of Kafka’s texts, or a definitive account of French readings of Kafka, but rather to regroup apparent trends in the reading of Kafka and to examine how Blanchot and Robert—as the chief critical figures of this project—read and enrich these trends. A principal concern of this study will be the very nature of interpretation: how do we read, interpret, comment, and what is the role of fiction in these pursuits? These authors demonstrate how fiction itself is fictionalizing these questions, and how the novel often seems only to be fictionalizing its own limitations. Robert asks, toward the conclusion of _L’Ancien et le nouveau_, “Est-ce à dire que la grandeur de la littérature ne peut plus consister que dans un grandiose constat de sa faillite?” and we will return to this inquiry in nearly every chapter.

Often, when analyzing Kafka, a writer will have recourse to an anecdote or apophistic turn of phrase in attempting to capture his or her particular understanding of

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Kafka’s essence. Camus’ by now well-known opening phrase in “L'espoir et l'absurde dans l'oeuvre de Franz Kafka” has been much cited: “Tout l'art de Kafka est d'obliger le lecteur à relire.”

Georges Bataille offers a pithy summary of the proper communist approach to Kafka, which would be to burn his writing, as Kafka famously directed his friends to do upon his death. Sartre, in his brief references to Kafka in Situations I, seems to reduce Kafka to little more than a writer of fantasy. These authors writing about the fantastic, communism, or the Absurd, tend to simplify Kafka’s art, even if they verge on worshiping the author. The goal of this project is to complicate Kafka’s French legacy by turning to writers who endeavor not only to prolong the mysteries of Kafka’s life and texts, but to search for or create new ones. If we return to Camus’ article, in fact, his very next sentence explores how Kafka’s

Ses dénouements, ou ses absences de dénouement, suggèrent des explications, mais qui ne sont pas révélées en clair et qui exigent, pour apparaître fondées, que l'histoire soit relue sous un nouvel angle. Quelquefois, il y a une double possibilité d'interprétation, d'où apparaît la nécessité de deux lectures.

Camus is on the right track with this insight, and yet he does not go far enough. It is not the duality of readings which is important to Kafka’s work, but the multiplicity of readings; Kafka’s texts are not of course unique in their opening onto this possibility; this is a trait common to most, if not all, literature. With these characteristics in mind, I will turn my attention to three authors of widely contrasting notoriety, popularity, and prestige and yet of equal devotion to Franz Kafka: Marthe Robert, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Maurice Blanchot.

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18 Camus, 171.
Marthe Robert (1914-1996) is the most widely published critic on Kafka in the French language. She wrote three book-length studies, and in her later, fragmentary style of the *Livre de lectures* series, she devoted a number of fragments to Kafka. Robert deserves to be read because she moved her criticism beyond the platitudes and dualities of much of Kafka interpretation. Robert’s talent was to read Kafka not only in the context of the western canon, but also in the unique context of his own lifetime. She, like Deleuze and Guattari after her, was sensitive to Kafka’s position of being three times an outsider in his own life: outside linguistically (as a German speaker in Prague), outside religiously (as Jewish in a Christian country), and outside socially (as an assimilated Jew vis-à-vis the Jewish community of believers).

Like Robert, Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003) was attuned to the particularities of Kafka’s life. Blanchot’s interest in Kafka spans thirty years and is expressed in chapters and articles that appear in almost all of his critical texts. They were eventually collected in *De Kafka à Kafka* (1981). Blanchot’s contribution to Kafka criticism is more inconspicuous than some others, for although his texts are significant to certain critics, they are largely unread by a wider public. For this reason, Blanchot has the reputation of having influenced Derrida, Foucault, and other writers of the so-called Post-Structuralist or Deconstructionist movements, while he himself is overlooked or ignored. This trend is beginning to be reversed with the appearance of more studies in the Anglo-American realm, and we will analyze his critical reception in Chapter Three.

This project can be divided into two thematic units; the first is a survey and framing of the theoretical writings on Kafka by Robert and Blanchot. The second unit is
the close reading of two novels in the light of their criticism. The two novels I will be re-reading are *Dans le labyrinthe* by Robbe-Grillet and *Aminadab* by Blanchot. The choice of these texts is not arbitrary. Though French literature has numerous instances of novels, short stories, or plays written in a Kafkaesque vein or that display traces of Kafka’s concerns, it is my contention that *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab* are unique in the ways that they echo many of Kafka’s themes and notions, but for their hermeneutical adaptability with reference to the critical writings of Robert and Blanchot.

Kafka’s writing, when reduced to its simplest form, can be referred to as fiction that features powerful bureaucratic systems (the Law, the Castle, the Father, etc.) that manipulate the lives of an “everyman” character. The system is infallible, inaccessible, and indifferent to the pleas of a given character. This overarching thematic, the “Kafkaesque” (*Kafkaïen* in French), displays itself in the text by a reliance on labyrinths, closed spaces, unending speeches, stories, and the commentary and the subsequent explanation of these legends. In Kafka’s texts, there are also passages evoking eroticism, love, and an indomitable black humor. These themes are made evident in Kafka’s novels—I will be referring primarily to *The Trial* and *The Castle*—by way of a dual narrative procedure. By this I mean that the novels tell one story while within this narrative a second story is recounted by way of legends, exegeses, and suppositions. This last feature is also prominent in the two novels I will be interpreting and is the conclusive link between the work of Kafka and these novels by Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot.
Dans le labyrinthe (1959) is Alain Robbe-Grillet’s (1922-2008) fourth novel.\textsuperscript{19} Like that of Kafka’s texts, its dual narrative structure is evident. On the one hand, an author sits in his room composing (or considers composing) a text. The text that he composes (or supposes he is composing) is the narrative of a Soldier who, after a defeat in a battle, must return a box that belonged to a fallen comrade to the latter’s family. The Soldier encounters many problems—he is ignorant of the dead soldier’s name, he does not have an address to guide him, and the townspeople treat him with suspicion and contempt. The spaces that the Soldier traverses are narrow, labyrinthine, and simultaneously full of mystery and deprived of deeper meaning. There is no suggestion of a magical interference in the city, but the commonplace is rendered absurd or fantastic by the author’s adherence to precise descriptions and the representation of perpetually falling snow. The Soldier circles the city, time repeats itself, and daydreams, feverish hallucinations, and reality become blended in a fictional récit which ends where it starts, in a dusty room inhabited by je, the implied author of a novel about the peregrinations of a soldier. As such, the dual narrative explores both the author’s struggles to write and the Soldier’s labors to complete his quest.

Aminadab (1943) is Blanchot’s fourth novel and shares many of the themes and narrative structures we have previously mentioned. Whereas Kafka’s novels and Dans le labyrinthe split their time between a labyrinthine street and closed, interior spaces, Blanchot’s novel takes place almost entirely in the claustrophobic space of a boarding house. Thomas, a wanderer, passes in front of the house and, seeing a figure signal to him from the top floors, enters hoping to find this person. The remainder of the novel details

\textsuperscript{19}Robbe-Grillet’s first written novel, Un regicide, was composed in 1958 but not published until 1973.
Thomas’ efforts to reach the attic room and learn what the original signal meant. Like the other texts, it too has a dual narrative structure. Thomas’ wanderings are described while at the same time the elaborate histories, legends, and myths of the house are retold.

A final unifying concept in the novels as well as the criticism is a tendency to examine, doubt, and comment on the nature of the self. Common across the spectrum of the most noteworthy thinkers to approach Kafka has been a shared preoccupation with subjectivity. We will examine questions of the self, the I, as it is understood in regard to characters and the author. It is the link joining Robert, Robbe-Grillet, Blanchot and Kafka, a man who claimed to have nothing in common even with himself. For Robert, the self is examined in relation to Romanticism as well as to the author’s struggle as he sees himself caught between his writing and life beyond literature. For Blanchot, the unity of the self is to be questioned, and he advances his theories of the author (especially Kafka) in terms of a movement from je to il, that is to say as a sort of alienation of the self.

Questions of selfhood and subjectivity are posed in the fiction of Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet as well as in the criticism of Robert, Blanchot, and, in Chapter Five, Claude Morali. In his *Qui est moi aujourd’hui?* (1981), Morali surveys the discourse of post-Cartesian notions of the self and finally adopts a malleable definition of selfhood as being a condition of fluidity and flux, comparable to childhood. Morali’s analogy is particularly poignant because of the importance that childhood holds in Kafka’s texts. Kafka’s fictions are filled with figures representing childhood and playfulness, figures that, at least in *The Castle*, are responsible for teaching lessons to those who are otherwise obsessed with their own singular subjectivity and burdened with too much
seriousness. This final theme will ultimately relate back to the previous topics that this project will discuss: interpretation, life and art, and literary traditions, all of which are linked, literally or rhetorically, to these questions of subjectivity and childhood.

There is no systematic study, with the exception of the aforementioned surveys, meant to explore the depth of the relationship between Kafka and the French world of letters. Many critics seem content to say, for instance, that Blanchot had an “interest in Kafka’s storytelling” but such a statement does not say enough. This project explores the very core of this relationship by way of Robert, Blanchot, and Robbe-Grillet. It must be recognized, however, that this project is outside of any formal domain—French Kafka Studies is not a discipline. Consequently, there is no canon to recognize or discredit, no overriding prejudices to sweep aside, and no map to follow. There is no school of thought to which to conform, and so, it will be necessary to weave in and out of theories as this project takes on an almost historiographical approach—not quite literary history, but a progression through literary movements and conceptual tendencies.

Chapter One surveys and examines Marthe Robert’s place in French literary criticism. Robert holds a mysterious position in French letters; she sits outside any school of criticism. What she does offer is one of the clearest and most insightful collections of texts on Franz Kafka. This chapter will offer a view of her critical career while focusing on her Kafka writings. In Robert’s writing, which spans almost thirty years, Kafka was a constant fixture. This chapter analyzes how Robert studied Kafka as well as the evolution in her criticism. We begin by quickly contextualizing Robert in French letters before

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establishing how important Kafka was to her career as a whole. Through her interest in Kafka, we learn the principal preoccupations of Robert’s theoretical writings: the elevation of the art of writing to an almost religious level, the stark distinction between life and literature, the genre conventions apparent in his fiction, and finally the structural underpinnings of Kafka’s fiction in relation to the western literary cannon.

This last point is elaborated in depth in *L’Ancien et le nouveau*, Robert’s second text devoted to Kafka. It is in this study that she describes the struggle between the ancients and the moderns, and how modernism is engaged in a fight to liberate itself from the past, and yet remains shackled to the old forms. Don Quixote exhibits this battle in his romanticizing of the old epic tradition only to fall into disillusionment and madness when faced with his modern world. Kafka in general, and K., the Land Surveyor of *The Castle* in particular, shows yet another iteration of this basic component of “modern” literature. In the case of *The Castle*, K. surveys literature and moves freely across the many literary genres—the fantastic novel, detective novel, the epic, the Odyssey, the Grail Quest, and the novel of manners form the landscape he traverses.

As Robert’s writing interacts with notions of genre, the contrast between life and literature, the remnants of Romanticism, and the persistent religious aspects of the craft of writing, a constant theme in her criticism is the possibility of interpretation. How can one find stable meanings, how does one produce exegetical explanations of a given work? When is the critic’s work completed?

Chapter Two will examine *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab* in the light of Robert’s writing, looking specifically at questions of genre, the conflict between life and
art, and structural and rhetorical issues. The chapter begins by briefly examining how other critics have staged the relationship between Robbe-Grillet and Kafka then it offers a detailed reading of *Dans le labyrinthe*; this chapter closely follows the structure of the preceding chapter on Robert. We will look at the structural and thematic unity of Robert’s conceptions of Kafka’s text and demonstrate how many of the themes and structures she highlights are also present in *Dans le labyrinthe*. Based on this analysis, we will examine genre, specifically looking at the striking parallels that present themselves when reading *Dans le labyrinthe* as a rewriting of the *Perceval* legend, just as Robert read *The Castle* in this way. Continuing with a close genre-related reading, we will move to Blanchot’s *Aminadab* which allows for similar superimpositions of genre. One of the important genres that Robert discusses, in addition to epic writing, is the fantastic. Kafka’s texts often defamiliarize the real to such an extent that they seem to be purely fantastical. The character, lost in the all-too-familiar, endeavors to lay bare hidden truths in an absurd world. This genre-theme is present in *Aminadab* and comes to the fore rhetorically through the repeated use of *comme si* or *as if*. This chapter will study this expression in detail and demonstrate how it reflects many of Robert’s concerns about the problematic nature of interpretation and establishing fixed, transcendental truths.

Chapter Three analyzes Maurice Blanchot’s insights regarding Kafka’s work, though it must be acknowledged that Blanchot is less interested in explicating Kafka’s work than exploring the wider possibilities of literature. To Blanchot, Kafka is a writer who exhibits the characteristics of the essence of a *Writer*. The writer, taking Kafka as a model, is in conflict with himself; he loses the power to say “I” when he writes—his
writing voice prolongs the murmur of language, which rustles beneath the content of a story. Unlike Chapter One on Robert, which was structured thematically, this chapter is organized chronologically, which allows for the evolution in Blanchot’s thought to become apparent but also highlights the thematic concerns that dominate his criticism.

The discussion of Blanchot begins with a contextualization of his work in the French critical climate of the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s and then offers a chronological view of his texts devoted to Kafka. A close reading of these texts follows, starting at the end, as it were, with “le Pont de bois,” an article which complicates the interpretative process much as Robert’s work does. This last Kafka article is also most revealing because it both presents many of Blanchot themes as well as reworks the focal points of his earliest article on the subject, “La Lecture de Kafka.” Though we start at the end, we quickly find ourselves at the beginning and proceed programmatically through Blanchot’s critical career examining the nature of literature and criticism, the language of fiction, the specter of death which looms over the writing process, and finally several texts that consider the position of the writer in the vast world of fiction.

The writer, for Blanchot, is epitomized by Kafka. The writer must face the solitude of this task and understand that (s)he will receive nothing in return. There is no romantic glory to this craft. The writer, alone with paper and pen can only write, and in writing, become distanced from him or herself. It is in this alienation, which is also an erring, that Blanchot discovers the neutre—a voice whereby the author loses the power to say je and can only say il. For Blanchot, il, is not literally “he,” another subjectivity, but rather a murmur that hints at subjectivity without ever formulating it. It is the space
between what is said and what is, a rustle that signifies that something is being said even if what is being said cannot, in the end, be acknowledged or interpreted. It is ambiguity itself. From the theme of ambiguity, we return to our starting point of commentary and interpretation as we prepare again to analyze the fiction of Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot.

Chapter Four complements Chapter Two; we read *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab* in the light of Blanchot’s critical writings on Kafka. This chapter explores how *Dans le labyrinthe* often exhibits literal illustrations of Blanchot’s theoretical and abstract notions, such as a character passing from *je* to *il*. We also examine the concept of pathways, errors, and patience in *Dans le labyrinthe*. Not only does this novel illustrate the writer’s ambiguous position of solitude, but it also reveals Blanchot’s ideas about the language of fiction, such as the *neutre*, questions of voice, and interrogation. Next, this chapter analyzes how *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab* overlap in regard to a principal tenet of Blanchot’s theory: error. To Blanchot error (*errer*) means both to be mistaken and to wander. From this perspective, we trace the mistakes of the Soldier in *Dans le labyrinthe* and those of Thomas in *Aminadab* and show how this errancy reinforces these characters’ waywardness. The peregrination of the Soldier and Thomas is thematically linked both to paths and goals, and we examine how Blanchot enriches this theme through commenting on Kafka’s own writing. Ultimately these mistakes, this wandering, and the pathways without goals—later rephrased as goals without paths—hint at questions of subjectivity. As they wander, these characters that, from the very beginning, never had names, families or origins, cannot help but question what it means to have a
self, to be a subject. The appearance of questions such as “Qui êtes-vous?” will prove to be only the thinnest veil covering the question “Who am I?”

Chapter Five revisits many of the themes that we will have encountered in the previous chapters, such as questions of subjectivity, patience, and interpretation while situating them into the wider context of a discourse on the self and language. This chapter also introduces the metaphor of “enfance” and “naissance” as developed by Claude Morali in his study *Qui est moi aujourd’hui?* The conclusion attempts, finally, to respond to Marthe Robert’s question “Est-ce à dire que la grandeur de la littérature ne peut plus consister que dans un grandiose constat de sa faillite?”21 by putting into context the rhetoric of childhood and of the self, which we explore in this chapter.

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Uncertainty, aridity, peace—
All things will resolves themselves into these
And pass away.¹

Chapter 1

Marthe Robert: lectrice de Kafka

In the opening line of *Le Livre de lectures*, Marthe Robert identifies what has been her investigative drive for some forty years: “Je n’en finis pas de m’interroger sur la littérature et, surtout, sur les rapports exacts des choses écrites avec la vie.”² She seeks to reveal “ce que le fait littéraire a de flou, de fuyant et d’incompréhensible.”³ Though she acknowledges that such a goal is rather ambitious, she has undertaken this critical quest from the time of her first published book until her death, and it is noteworthy that it is Franz Kafka who literally bookends her literary life.

Marthe Robert presents one of the more perplexing paradoxes in French criticism of the twentieth-century. She is one of the most widely published critics on Kafka’s work, yet she is relatively unknown. No article has been devoted solely to her thought, though she has been quoted by Blanchot, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Deleuze and Guattari. Even if she has been quoted, she is often relegated to footnotes and has no little critical prestige. In spite of her marginal position in French criticism, she plays a leading role in German

³ Ibid.
Literature studies, translation, as well as Kafka scholarship. She wrote thirteen book-length studies spanning almost fifty years; she translated Lichtenberg, Goethe, Büchner, Nietzsche, the Grimm Brothers, Robert Walser as well as Kafka’s short stories, journals, and correspondence, providing a preface to many of these works for French readers. She wrote essays, translations, and criticism. She offered analyses of some of the most notable writers in the Western canon including Kafka, Cervantes, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Strindberg, Heine, Goethe, Freud, Nietzsche, and so on. But it must be admitted, as stated by James Kirkup in his elegiac obituary of Robert, that “Kafka was her special love.”

Marthe Robert, more than a critic, psychoanalyst, translator, or writer, is a reader, une lectrice. She is an acute reader and compiler of literary tendencies and is intimately knowledgeable of the western literary tradition from The Odyssey, through Perceval, to Don Quixote, from Goethe, Balzac, and Flaubert, to Dostoyevsky, Musil, Kafka, and beyond. Because Robert had such a breadth of critical experience, her ideas enlighten almost every subject of literary studies, such as translation, genre, structuralism and its offshoots, as well as the means by which literature conveys meanings and truth. It is as a reader that she is bound to the book and bound to the literary world. Naturally, this lifetime of hers spent reading only highlighted the gap between literature and life, reading and experiencing, and in the end, between writing and living.

Robert’s career reveals one of the many dilemmas that fueled her criticism. In this case, it is the question of writing and living, but she also notes many other alternatives which seem to daunt criticism: the old and the new; les anciens et les modernes;

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romanticism and realism; dream and reality; fiction and the real; psychological or biographical criticism and exegetical commentary; childhood and maturity; and heart and mind. When Robert mentions a binary opposition she is not necessarily aiming to prolong a dichotomy or even to solve the either/or dilemmas once and for all. She is simply touching upon common motifs and seeking a way to step beyond them. In her writing she will as frequently conclude “both” as she will “neither,” but she acknowledges the difficult critical position it would take to ignore these existing yes-no options. Due to her awareness of binary opposites and her wariness of these potential traps, her criticism advances carefully, with an almost paranoid note of self-awareness, like a patient sitting on a psychoanalyst’s couch constantly second-guessing the answers given, cautious of making the mistake she has taken such pains to avoid. This very well may be a trend that she gleaned from a lifetime spent studying one Franz Kafka.

Robert’s criticism is special in that it does not aim to explicate Kafka nor to commit “le péché de l’exégèse;” instead she strives to uncover his art. And this she did systematically, essay by essay, book by book, even word by word. Robert devoted four texts to Franz Kafka and numerous smaller essays. Beginning with her Introduction à la lecture de Kafka (1946) and followed by a second, more complete survey simply entitled Kafka (1960). In her study, L’Ancien et le nouveau: de Don Quichotte à Kafka (1963), Robert offered her first in-depth study of Kafka and the criticism which surrounded him, moving away from the survey-style which marks her two preceding books.

While in her work of 1963 she divided her attention between Cervantes and Kafka, following several important themes of character, writing, and modernism as well

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as the age-old battle between the *anciens* and the *modernes*, she did publish one more full-scale study on Kafka with *Seul, comme Kafka* (1977). This book, while pointing out the lack of creativity in Kafka studies, also begins to demonstrate clearer preoccupation with psychoanalysis, which becomes even more apparent in the later studies *La révolution psychanalytique* and *D’Œdipe à Moïse*. In these studies, not necessarily devoted to literary history or the evolution of the novel, we can see the presence of Kafka in her thought. Toward the end of her career, Robert made a notable formal change, switching from cohesive essays and book-length studies to a fragmentary writing style similar to Maurice Blanchot’s *Le Pas au-delà, L’Entretien infini*, or *L’Écriture du désastre*. Her last series of books, a collection of sketches, journal entries, and literary *pensées* were grouped under the title *Livre des lectures*. The first of these titles appeared in 1977 and has no subtitle, though she did provide subtitles for the remaining editions starting with *La Vérité littéraire* (1981), *La Tyrannie de l’imprimé* (1984), and finally *Le Puits de Babel* (1987). The final book that Robert composed bears specific mention, for the title itself is an homage to Kafka’s aphorism “The Pit of Babel:” “What are you building?—I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. / We are digging the pit of Babel.” 6 Strangely, Robert makes no explicit mention of this parable, though she devotes 13 separate fragments to Kafka and his work. This final text—its very fragmentation calling to mind Kafka’s unfinished work and the inconclusiveness of his literary endeavors—with its many essays and notes on Kafka as well as the homage explicit in its title, serves admirably to

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bookend Robert’s career devoted to literature and in a very real sense, devoted to Kafka the man, the author, the myth.

“Quant à Kafka”

Robert seems wholly incapable of writing an essay that does not refer to Kafka in one way or another. The little phrase, “quant à Kafka” shows up with noticeable regularity in her essays and fragmentary writing not to mention the books whose sole subject is Kafka. Robert’s first study treats Kafka, though it was little more than a survey of his fictions and a notation of commentary that has been devoted to the German language writer of Jewish origins from Prague. The same could be said for her second published book devoted to this writer. It was in this latter effort, however, that Roland Barthes detected an approach that he characterized as “un propos très nouveau” and deemed to be “profondément original.”7 What struck Barthes in this survey was not her ability to collect or organize the work of others, but rather, her insight. He refers to her voice as unique, before identifying her principal themes—solitude, alienation, analogous writing, the quest—and finally makes note of Robert’s analysis of “Kafka’s truth,” which is to say, his technique. The word technique is troubling because it is not clear in what way Robert is using it; at times it means a writer’s craft, at other times it may mean art, writing, language, style, or simply the writer himself.

As Robert’s critical vision matured, many themes, in synch with and beyond her aforementioned binaries, began to take shape. This maturity became increasingly apparent with the publication of L’Ancien et le nouveau: de Don Quichotte à Kafka. It is in this book that one notices the genesis of themes that will be consistent throughout the

remainder of her career, themes that, though they appear in all of her writing, have Kafka at their heart. Among these ideas, it is important to note her description of character, especially the modernist character and changes that have taken place since the appearance of Don Quixote and the end of the Epic tradition.8

Robert examines the epic tradition, signaling how the tenets of the old are often times used as fodder for imitation in modern texts, but this very imitation, or sense of nostalgia, is in fact a source of frustration for writers who seek to push their craft into new directions. She chooses Don Quixote for her starting point in this endeavor, describing how Cervantes and Don Quixote, like Kafka and K. in a later stage of this development, are folded into one literary entity which demands investigation if any exegetical study is to be conducted. The book itself is divided into two parts with equal attention given to Don Quixote and The Castle. Robert develops her ideas of character and modernism by exploring the notion of the quixotic. The quixotic is the idea that a character is both a slave to and free from the past as concerns former styles and genres. Don Quixote is at once an ironic response to the quest adventures, but also a convincing simulation of it. Quixote’s madness, a sort of demonic impulse, is studied at length, as is his art, his faith, his quest, and his relationship to writing and to the writer. K., the Land-surveyor, is held to the same definitions. His madness is his need to conform and understand the village, while refusing to abandon his past knowledge and his own customs. The Land-surveyor, as a learned man with tools and a keen eye for observation,

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8 End though it did, Robert maintains that it never died and has continued on as a sort of life after death. The moderns, the more they try to distance themselves from the old traditions, are in a very real sense shackled to their literary past. This is one idea explored in the first section of L’Ancien et le nouveau.
is linked by Robert to the act of writing as well as the craft of the writer. Robert’s study is accomplished without hyperbole and an extreme attention to detail.

Robert’s vision of what is Kafkaesque—a nameless, rootless character, the conflict between an outsider and a given culture, the architectural and bureaucratic labyrinth structures, the role of women and portraits, as well as what is unique in Kafka’s technique—can be used as a guide for reading many other fictions which derive from modernist fictions of the twentieth century. It is my contention that the foundation that Robert lays, from a theoretical point of view, is applicable to most authors of French literature of the twentieth-century, though in the case of the chapters to come, I will restrict my inquiry to Alain Robbe-Grillet and Maurice Blanchot.

Noteworthy among her conclusions is Robert’s call to continue going forward in the face of a critical or exegetical task that seems doomed to inconclusiveness at best and endlessness at worst. The need to reread and reevaluate is present in all of Robert’s writings, but it is best encapsulated in the concluding fragment of her first Livre de lectures. Though it is Robert’s conclusion, a conclusion not only to this book of ideas but to an entire lifetime of reading, thought and criticism, I will not consider it the conclusion to this study, instead I will treat it as an incipit. It will be the starting point as I unfold Robert’s critical work and lay the foundation for the writers still to be studied.

Concluding in a similar vein as did Starobinksy, Magny, and Blanchot before her, Robert maintains that as far as Kafka is concerned, as far as commentary and criticism are concerned, there is no definitive last word. There is only the work that remains to be conducted and that exists in the space where the last word cannot be printed or spoken. Robert offers the following fragment which concludes her study:
Cela dit il n’y a pas de dernier mot. —La danse de mort où la littérature s’étourdît et s’épuise ressemble à celle de Strindberg en ce qu’elle n’est encore qu’une répétition : elle ne trouve une espèce de fin que dans le « Continuons ! » par quoi le Capitaine à bout de forces s’assure le retour de ses vieux tourments. —Eh bien, soit, continuons…

And so it is here that we begin.

“Le Cas de Kafka”

If it is by way of such a daunting conclusion, or rather anti-conclusion, that Robert’s criticism is to be broached, then how are we to understand the totality of her work by starting at the end, as it were? Robert’s way of encapsulating and using other critics’ conclusion as her own point of departure is a reliable precedent, and it must be acknowledged just how much of an expert of Kafka criticism she was. “Il n’y a pas,” Robert emphatically concludes, “d’explication dernière, pas de dernier mot à dire sur cette œuvre unique en son genre, inachevée en raison même de sa perfection et, par suite, aussi limitée quant à la place qu’elle occupe sur les rayons de nos bibliothèques que sans limites quant à sa portée.” The limitlessness of literary meaning is daunting, but it is also hopeful, in an imminent way, to which the Strindberg reference is alluding. Through the infinity of a task one can take heart—but how? Robert circles around this theme, phrasing and rephrasing her anti-climactic finale with different proofs, different stories, and different journal entries, as if she were trying to reassure herself that this ending is not as hopeless at it first appears. Robert concludes her last full study Seul comme Kafka by studying the curious story “The Worries of a Family Man” and its quirky hero, Odradek, a sentient being that most closely resembles, oddly enough, a spool of yarn. “There is no last word,” Robert observes, echoing an idea that Blanchot previously stated, he himself

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alluding to Starobinsky and Magny. Odradek as a being, as well as a fictional construct, is Robert’s final analogy for Kafka’s oeuvre: unfinished yet perfect in its lack of completion.

There is not one but many reasons as to why Kafka’s work is ultimately unexplainable, why the commentary of his corpus is, in the final estimation, “Inépuisable.”¹⁰ The reasons come from the fact that in reading Kafka’s work, “Ses hypothèses sont toutes également plausibles et également invérifiables.”¹¹ The lessons that Robert gleans from The Trial also relate to her conclusions about The Castle or about literature, or criticism about Kafka’s fiction, which is, in and of itself, yet another wicked mise-en-abîme. The best book, accordingly, “est celui qui se fait voir éternellement en quête du vrai, et éternellement fallacieux.”¹² Blanchot has written about this self-deception, describing how Kafka’s writing, more than any other, searches for an affirmation by way of negation. Robert herself continually highlights this contradiction, citing Kafka’s dictum to the effect that the positive has already been stated, all that is left is to find the negative. For Robert, this negation is the inconclusiveness of criticism; she goes to great length to “ne pas présenter l’interprétation de son œuvre,” and to avoid at all costs, “le péché de l’exégèse.”¹³

Kafka’s work is not alone in its resistance to pat categorizations and conclusive explanations; Robert labors to prove that the epic tradition is impossible to ignore in novels of the modern period, which is to say from Don Quixote to the present. L’Ancien et le nouveau is a study that she devotes in its entirety to this theme, uniting the

¹¹ Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 250.
¹² Ibid., 171.
¹³ Robert, Sur le papier, 47.
undeniably unclassifiable and inconclusive nature of Kafka to the quixotic tradition of Cervantes. The quixotic novel is bound to the past despite its fervent desire to move into a modern mode of writing but because of this incessant struggle with the past it becomes both past and future though conceivably denied a present. This lack of a present, this hole, or absent center, is in fact the inconclusiveness to which she is referring. “Le texte donquichottesque,” she states, “ne porte rien qui ressemble à un enseignement formable”14 as such, like the work of Kafka, Don Quixote “est sans conclusion … l’épopée est devenue impossible.”15 If Robert, in analyzing the problems of a definitive description—or any textual commentary at all—has avoided committing the sin of exegesis, she has in no way wavered from her belief that “l’exégèse est impie,”16 and she devotes substantial effort to criticizing, though without naming names, critics who attempt to provide a definitive reading of Kafka.

Debating what other critics have attempted to conclude, Robert, with a fanciful flick of the hand, discards all of their hypotheses with the studied statement that, “le roman n’a pas de clé.”17 In a rare moment of pique, Robert reproaches critics, “parce qu’à force de chercher ce que Kafka veut dire, mais ne dit pas, [ils deviennent] aveugle[s] aux mots qu’il écrit noir sur blanc.”18 These attempts to explain Kafka, about which Robert complains, are nothing more than reductive replacements, amount to little more than attempting to squeeze him into a narrow critical discourse and she warns that providing a single explanation for Kafka’s work is in fact nothing more than a translation of his work

14 Robert, L'Ancien et le nouveau, 29.
15 Ibid., 168.
16 Robert, Sur le papier, 53.
17 Robert, L'Ancien et le nouveau, 277.
into a new idiom that serves no purpose at all. Robert explains, “si Le Procès peut-être traduit en termes métaphysiques, téléologiques, psychologiques, etc. … les traductions se basculent … et finissent par s’annuler.”19 Moreover, Robert cautions against reducing Kafka’s stories to simple one-for-one replacements. She writes: “si on [tient l’œuvre de Kafka] d’avance pour résolue, ce que l’on fait chaque fois qu’on traduit Kafka dans une autre langue”20 such as a political, social, or religious language, one is not interpreting, one is, in fact, avoiding interpretation. Since “c’est peine perdue que de chercher de nouvelles clés” she, in a sense, throws the baby out with the bath water because, when dealing with overly reductive explanations, the reader “ne perd rien, on gagne surement à les abandonner.”21 Robert continues her admonishment of these simplified and all-encompassing explanations of Kafka’s work.

To repeat, Kafka defies a single conclusion: “Étant donné le malentendu fondamental sur quoi repose l’interprétation symbolique du roman, on croit pouvoir tenir l’inexplicable revirement du Château non certes pour un vulgaire mensonge, mais pour une tromperie tactique.”22 She is baffled; “qu’on puisse porter une pareille platitude théologique au compte de Kafka laisse évidemment confondu, d’autant que le texte ne dit pas un mot qui accrédite si peu que ce soit la thèse du mensonge, tactique ou non.” 23 And finally, after an entire career, Robert seems to have finally reached her limit of patience regarding spurious Kafka criticism. She has little tolerance for commentaries that explain

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19 Robert, Sur le papier, 186-87.
20 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 194.
21 Ibid.
22 Robert, Livre de lectures, 29.
parts but not the whole, which includes theological, negative theology, and rationalist readings of his novels. In the end, a given reading of Kafka is not the whole, but a whole, just as for K. the Castle is not the whole but a whole. It is after making variations of this same argument for some thirty years, that when a colloque was held at the Sorbonne in 1976 the question was posed, “Que reste-t-il de Kafka?” that Robert was able to respond with a simple, yet resounding “tout.”

When Robert discusses interpretation, she inevitably confronts the problem of translation. It is not simply a question of critically translating Kafka’s fiction into an academic discourse, but also a concrete question of translation. While discussing The Castle, she finds a simple metaphor that unites the problem of translating the title to the attempts at offering a reading of the text itself. If there is literally an infinite amount of criticism possible in the text, the same is true in attempting to decode the word Castle or Château with respect to the German Schloss. The very word Castle has caused problems for critics because “le mot a une force infiniment plus convaincante que la chose.” The word castle and all of its literary evocations are, like commentary, beyond anyone’s control. Harkening to the aforementioned epic tradition, Robert studies the ways in which meaning overflows the boundaries of the text, inherited from a long literary heritage.

24 The Castle is salvation or even God, which K. will attain upon his death.
25 The impossibility of reaching the Castle is analogous to man’s infinite separation from God after the latter’s death.
26 K. has come to the village to spread the Enlightenment ideals of Truth, Progress, Science, and Republicanism.
27 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 181-83.
28 Robert, La vérité littéraire, 91.
29 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 197.
30 With the word Castle, Robert shows not only how the word evokes an entire literary tradition with impossible to control connotations, but she also insists on the fact that Schloss, the German term, refers to a castle and a lock.
In directly addressing the problems of translations, Robert does not offer as
detailed an analysis as does Monique Moser-Verrey, even if she does take into account
the work of the French translators of Kafka: Vialatte and Bernard Lortholary. Robert’s
views on the subject are to be taken seriously for she translated Kafka’s journals and the
bulk of his correspondence. Writing about translation in an abstract manner, but always
referring back to Kafka, Robert takes exception to a translating tendency that updates
texts into a contemporary lexicon. She folds this discussion into a larger fragment in
which she theorizes on how well books age. She says that attempting to update
translations—especially Kafka—into modern day speech does not produce a translation
but “une adaptation anachronique” and she calls it “dénestable en elle-même, cette
pseudo-modernisation,” which has the added disadvantage of aging a book quicker than
need be when its original goal was to bring it up to date.\footnote{Robert, \textit{La vérité littéraire}, 152.}

In \textit{L’Ancien et le nouveau}, as well as \textit{Seul comme Kafka}, Robert searches for one
single best genre for Kafka’s novels. As such, she wonders if \textit{The Trial} is a fable, fairy-
tale, a detective story, a serial thriller, a legal report, or even a children’s story. She does
the same with \textit{The Castle}: Grail Story, New Odyssey, serial thriller, \textit{bildungsroman}, and
degenerated epic. By “degenerated epic” she means that Kafka is taking up the mantle of
the disintegrated remains of the epic tradition as a sort of late imitator of Cervantes’s
effort in \textit{Don Quixote}. Robert’s method of picking a genre, trying it on for size and then
casting it aside as only a part of a whole or as an incomplete explanation is a fascinating
counterbalance to many other critics. In the writing of de Rougement, Vialatte, and
Carrouges, for instance, there is a note of despair that Kafka cannot be easily classed, whereas Robert almost celebrates this resistance to categorization.

On the subject of genre, Kafka mutilates any set model; his work occasionally may bear a resemblance to a comedy of manners or a serial thriller while at the same time avoiding any serious confrontation with these genres: Kafka’s work functions as a sort of mimetic ruse—a novel that seems to represent an earlier novel while at the same time being a faulty facsimile, a phony effort, an ironic wink of the eye. Though she remarks how Kafka’s writing exists outside any established classification, she recognizes and examines how Kafka does in fact belong to a certain epic tradition. An epic tradition, yes, but it cannot be classified as an epic. In *L’Ancien et le nouveau* as well as in an essay in *Sur le papier*, Robert shows how Kafka picked up, imitated, and, in a way, deconstructed, the vestiges of the epic. She eventually decides, once more employing Ulysses and Don Quixote as models, that “L’épopée reste la source inépuisable de toute littérature vivante … K. [est le] dernier héros d’une Odyssée impossible.”

Yes, Kafka may be, as one possible reading among many, a modern day Ulysses *but* he is a Ulysses without tricks, as Robert explains. Moreover, though *The Odyssey* may be a model for imitation or mimicry, it falls apart under the weight of the modernist writing that is exemplified by Kafka. The quixotic and the Epic as “genre [sont morts], les titres sont légions, le héros a beaucoup de chose à dire, mais personne avec qui parler;” once thought dead, Robert concludes that “on ne le tue pas, il nargue tous les

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verdicts en survivant dans des genres mineurs.” This tradition, she claims, lives on in detective fiction, serial novels, westerns, and forms characterized by “une réalité foisonnante où rien de sûr, rien de stable, rien de vrai ne se lit.” There is a striking difference though. Whereas the detective novel is a categorized genre with rules, Kafka’s fiction only brushes against this genre, never fully adapting it or playing by its rules. The detective form is just one genre among many, but, according to Robert, it displays the traces of the ancien but at the same time cannot support the weight of its literary heritage. As such, the conflict has moved from a strict collision of old and new to become an enmeshing and confusion of genre. A lesson Robert’s takes from Quixote and Kafka is that she refuses binary, and instead she insists “il brise l’alternative où elle est enfermée.” Robert clarifies that Kafka “passe naturellement de la totalité épique au totalitarisme moderne, de l’ordre olympien à la tyrannie des bureaux, de l’aristocrate au fontionnaire paperassier, de l’action au bavardage — et de l’héroïsme à la littérature.” Like Don Quixote who never really took up a quest but instead lived out an insane literary paradigm, Kafka and his characters never fully grasp life and never move beyond gossip, tradition, and the burdensome weight of the printed page.

In her delineation of genre, she does acknowledge the shortcomings in her theory, but she persists that “l’épopée n’a pas de peine à l’emporter sur les genres plus récents qui entrent dans la contexture du Château.” Furthermore, “l’œuvre de Kafka représente l’extrême limite du conflit don quichottesque, entre la volonté d’illusionner et la

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33 Ibid., 200-01. There is an inherent link in this phrase to the theory of Minor Literature and Kafka proposed by Deleuze and Guattari.
34 Ibid., 201.
35 Ibid., 35.
36 Ibid., 247.
37 Ibid., 222.
clairvoyance de l’illusionniste, qui démontre ses propres tours en public.” 38 Robert suggests that Kafka obsesses over the novel and the epic tradition as representations of ancient literature, though he also seems to be conflicted in his desire to step away from it, to reveal the illusions and conventions of literature. Kafka is bound to the past even in his desire to break free from it. This motif is one to which Robert returns continually: there can be no true “new” because the new is still enslaved to the “old.”

Robert does find a way to say just that, though twenty years later: “S’il imite les Anciens, Kafka ne se targue pas pour autant de participer de leur ordre et leur bienheureuse sécurité, il fonde au contraire son droit à le faire sur son propre désordre social et spirituel.” 39 In this passage, Robert omits the possessive form of Kafka; instead of saying Kafka’s writing, it is now just Kafka. Though many critics of grand renown, Blanchot, Starobinsky, and Robert, among others, studied Kafka’s correspondence and journals, they tend to restrict their criticism to this textual world, which does include the writer’s opinion of writing. Robert, in her Seul comme Franz Kafka and many of the fragments in her Livres de lecture, begins to move closer to a more biographical approach, but at the same time she expresses intolerance for critics who lack discipline in this touchy domain, confusing man and work. Consequently, she has no patience for critics who misuse the word Kafkaïen and expresses relief in the 80’s that “son nom et l’horrible adjective que l’on a tiré ne paraissent guère dans la presse quotidienne.” 40

Kafka the man does become an integral part of her overall theory of how to study Kafka’s writing. In claiming that the final analysis is in Kafka’s life, she faces many of...
the most pressing questions of Kafka’s existence, while at the same time she risks
committing the same sins that she criticized in others. These questions include why does
Kafka censor the word Jew in his work?, or the ubiquitous “brûler ou ne pas brûler?”41 in
reference to Brod’s decision to save Kafka’s writings.42 Though many writers refer to the
“cas de Kafka,” in Robert’s writing, this “Kafka case” is perhaps the confusion between
writer and writing, between author and character, and, as we will discuss later in this
chapter, between reality and fiction. She acknowledges this problem, reducing it as she
does to a simple analogy or allusion by way of the clause as if. “A première vue,” she
admits “le cas de Kafka paraît … plus compliqué;” the reader encounters Kafka’s
characters “sans pouvoir jamais s’imaginer rencontrer.”43 Reflecting a Blanchodian
theme, she claims that “on vit leur angoisse comme s’il n’y avait pas entre elle et nous
l’appareil factice de l’écriture et du papier.”44 The thin veil of writing is in fact an
imposing gulf, a seemingly unbridgeable chasm separating the reader from the character,
fiction from reality, and in a way, the writer himself just as much from his own literary
creation as from the life he wishes to live.

**Robert’s Kafka**

Any serious attempt to decode and analyze the work of Kafka begins almost
necessarily with Kafka himself. In perhaps one of the most egregious cases of *homme et oeuvre*, critics seem wholly uninterested in distinguishing the man from his fiction, and
all of Kafka’s writings become confused beneath the all-encompassing banner of

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41 Ibid., 171.
42 This question remains topical as a court has just made a ruling regarding a large collection of Kafka’s
texts that have been in a Swiss bank since the time of Brod’s death.
43 Robert, *Sur le papier*, 41
44 Ibid. (author’s emphasis).
literature: his letters, journals, and doodles are just as commented upon as are his novels, parables, stories, and aphorisms. Marthe Robert, in this respect, is no different. *Seul comme Kafka* is, in effect, a prolonged biographical study of Kafka. Even when she is writing a book of more or less strictly textual analysis, she cannot avoid the unique biography of Kafka or the peculiarities of his life.

It is unavoidable that she mention the broken-off engagements, the relationship with his father, his job at the insurance company and his being chronically disillusioned with life. In several chapters of *Seul comme Kafka*, Robert addresses Kafka’s rapport with the Jewish community of Prague, his feelings of assimilation, as well as his views on Judaism. In the end, she labels him an exile three times over: on account of his being Jewish in a Christian city, being an assimilated Jew vis-à-vis the Jewish community, and most importantly, being a German speaker in a Czech country. It is this last linguistic point which will become the most important fact for Robert’s work.

Robert is the translator of Kafka’s journals and correspondence; as such, she is intimately familiar with these writings but she also recognizes how dangerous confusing his fiction with his journals can be for a critic. “L’élément autobiographique chez Kafka,” she cautions, “peut donc à tout instant se dissoudre dans la fable.”45 Even his journal, it seems, dissolves into such uncontrollable realms. His journals are a hodgepodge of sketches, observations, and fictional incipits, and Robert warns that it is difficult to know to what extent anything is strictly fictional or strictly autobiographic. In fact, Robert notes that his autobiographical writings only partially obey the laws of this

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genre, which leads to confusion when used as biographical source. Barthes, for instance, acknowledges that because Kafka was such a fastidious writer and avoided at all costs the use of clichés and idées reçues, his journals and correspondence hold up to sustained literary study just as well as his fiction.

But there are gaps in the effectiveness of his journals in helping to shape a global portrait of the writer because he was notorious for omitting historically important events from his notebooks. For instance, when Prague was shaken by anti-Jewish rioting in 1899, an event that would no doubt be the cause for some concern for its Jewish denizens, Kafka did not write lengthy or detailed descriptions. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, he noted in his journal, “Germany has declared war on Russia.—Swimming in the afternoon.” As regards the events of his life, Robert muses that “En l’absence des sources directes qui permettraient peut-être de l’analyser, ce silence troublant reste naturellement en grande partie indéchiffrable.” The indecipherability of his opinions of the events of his day is similar to the indecipherability of his literature. Robert draws a larger conclusion. It is not that Kafka did not analyze the exterior world, it is rather that he was absolutely obsessed with witnessing an internal dream life, and because of his love to tell stories, like a true quixotic hero, he becomes “si bien distrait par ses propres contes qu’il en oublie tout bonnement la vie.” He does not willfully ignore life, he simply forgets about it in the maelstrom that is his imagined world.

What is less in doubt, however, is the nature of Kafka’s commitment to literature and language, for literature was his “bien aimée” even if he was “possédé et déchiré par

46 Ibid., 130.
48 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 64.
49 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau., 49.
Kafka loved literature to such a degree that he was bored by everything that was not it. Such love created an enormous tension in his life until he was literally unable to exist comfortably in his skin or in the world. Robert claims that his struggle between life and literature is what “fait l’œuvre de Kafka et défait sa vie.”

Robert, like Blanchot, claims that literature, for Kafka, is a command, an exigency, but this demand to write causes untold anxiety. For Kafka, “toute communication écrite est à la fois source de joie et cause d’angoisse.” With a split subject, the fact that he was torn between the joy and anguish of writing, Kafka struggled between himself and himself, a conflict which plays itself out in his journals, letters, as well as his fiction.

The split subject is what has characterized Kafka criticism from its beginning. Critics quickly recognized how Kafka the man, torn between life and literature, allows this conflict to appear in his fiction. It has become a cliché that critics systematically highlight the psychological aspects of Kafka as they manifest themselves in his fiction. Though it is not the central thrust of her work, Robert conforms to this quasi-biographical approach to criticism. She describes Kafka’s fiction as a self-centered work which “disjoint radicalement l’homme de l’écrivain;” from this point of view, “l’écrit prime la vie.” Kafka’s fictional texts, which are unplaceable in terms of time, space, and geography, are in fact an extension of his interior life. If Kafka’s work is characterized by such themes as oppressive bureaucracy, labyrinthine modes of authority, characters unsure of their place in the world, and a deadpan black humor, Robert suggests that the

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50 Robert, Sur le papier, 48.
51 Ibid., 43.
52 Ibid., 176.
54 Robert is referring to the fact that Kafka never names a city, a year, or a specific government. The year could be the early twentieth century and the place could be Prague, but the text never explicitly states it.
source of this characterization is the author’s inner life. She theorizes that in his fiction, as distinct from his journals and letters, I becomes he.\(^{55}\) Obviously, this echoes Blanchot’s theory of the neutral voice which he mentions in “Kafka et la littérature,” and pursues in “La Voix narrative.” A slight distinction, however, is to be discerned in Kafka. In contradistinction to Blanchot’s thought, which will be analyzed in Chapter Three, for Robert, the play of pronouns and subjectivity are not necessarily narrative techniques, but rather an extension of the principle of a man split between himself and himself. For Robert, literally, “le « il » qu’ils mettent en scène n’est jamais que le « je ».”\(^{56}\)

Kafka, through his fiction, experiences an intense alienation, which is only exacerbated by the dilemmas of life and literature. Robert underlines this motif with an understated question: “que dire de cette alternative: écrire ou vivre ?”\(^{57}\) Notably, though Kafka could find no solution to this alternative, it is possible that French critics have resolved it by collapsing the man and the work into one single oeuvre of study. Though for Kafka “il lui [fallait] dresser entre lui et lui une barrière infranchissable,”\(^{58}\) critics have systematically torn it down. If the barrier between himself and himself is the barrier between life and literature, no such division exists for French novelists and critics in their examination of Kafka and his texts.

Kafka was never able to solve the problem of reconciling life with literature and this is because of the conditions for writing that he imposed upon himself. Whereas other famous writers have been able to find a balance between the loneliness of writing and a satisfying private life or an engaged life of one manner or another, such balance always

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{57}\) Robert, *La Vérité littéraire*, 133.
eluded Kafka, or Kafka eluded it. The life of Kafka, whether viewed accurately or not, whether mythologized or not, has been constructed by French thinkers as an interminable struggle. He could not live because he wished only to write; he could not write because of the demands of life: work, sleep, familial obligations. Kafka’s great dream, evoked continually by Robert, was to be chained to a table in a basement where he could write, for writing was what he felt to be his essence. As Robert understood it, Kafka’s most important condition for writing is an essential and unblemished solitude; though Kafka never dared to go to such extremes, dream of it though he did. Some writers have solved similar conundrums by drawing from their life a certain amount of inspiration and literary precedents; “not Kafka. No, for writing he requires absolute solitude, a night blacker than all other nights, the silence of the tomb where he dreams of burying himself.”59 Robert frequently alludes to the death wish that is the pursuit of literature, and she locates the death wish in both the writer and the reader. Kafka is her suis generis example. The author, in Kafka’s case, abandons life and gives himself to the detrimental forces of writing: “By abetting only the destructive forces of life, it culminated in the most inexpiable of sins, namely, a barely deferred suicide.”60 Robert is suggesting that by forgetting the exterior world and devoting oneself solely to art, one is, for all intents and purposes, renouncing life.

Suicide, in its figurative sense, is not to be feared or treated as a taboo in Robert’s writing; in fact, its position is central both to Kafka and her thought in general. In a page-long fragment from Le Livre des lectures, she addresses the quixotic nature of what “

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59 Ibid., 106.
60 Ibid., 114-15.
barely deferred” suicide means, embracing suicide as an important element of the quixotic author, reader, and hero. In many ways, Robert collapses Kafka’s angst into an abstract anguish of the reader, viewing “la lecture … comme une forme de suicide.”61 Robert’s analysis is perhaps an echo of Bovarysme, only this time applied outside of fiction. She cites a complaint by the German poet August von Platen, appropriating the words to herself, vicariously admitting that “j’ai consummé ma vie entière en lectures, j’ai lu au lieu de vivre et les livres m’ont tué.”62 Like Kafka, the quixotic reader confuses “le vécu avec l’imprimé” which compensates for a deficiency in the reader’s very being, leaving one “à l’écart du monde.”63 The quixotic reader, like Kafka the man, is stranded between a fictional dream world and the real.

Robert deftly applies these thoughts to the reader to make her readings of Kafka all the more visceral, understandable, and in the end, true. True, in so far as it is only one reading among many, one understanding among many, and one truth among many. Robert the reader, Kafka, and Robert the reader of Kafka are constantly seeking in books something comforting even if such comfort is necessarily to be found beyond books and beyond life, in an ailleurs Robert comments that the reader, like Kafka, is hoping to find le salut in books at the expense of life, but this deferred search is quite absurd, and Robert calls it a kind of indefinite pursuit of the printed character; such is the tyrannie de l’imprimé as she will title the third of her fragmentary Livre de lectures. But writing is not as nefarious as Robert indicates, for she herself recognizes the complicity of the reader, just as she recognizes Kafka’s complicity in his own anguished existence. The

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61 Robert, Livre de lectures, 6.
62 Robert, Livre de lectures, 6.
63 Ibid.
inveterate reader is implicated because “il engage aussi la littérature à s’expliquer” and in so doing “lui permet de seconder…la mort en ayant l’air de représenter le vivant.”

Death and life, reader and writer, author and hero all become intertwined in a quixotic confusion. Robert’s detour allows us to recognize not how foreign Kafka is but rather how familiar he is. Not how he is an aberration in literary history, but how, like the quixotic tradition, he has always been present. We recognize and are moved (even shocked) not by the defamiliarization at hand, but by the fact that it has always been directly in front of us as readers and as humans.

The quixotic collaboration displays to what degree, according to Robert’s reading of Kafka, the weight of the literary past is always with him, and this is what Robert means when she is using the term quixotic. The quixotic is the nature of the past always clinging to the present in literary traditions. It is a writer so obsessed with the past, and so obsessed with the new that the old becomes inextricable from the new; Robert calls it the “mélange d’un ancien décrépit et d’un nouveau inachevé.”

While Robert does not provide a clear definition of modernism, it is to be distinguished from the (German) romanticism where vestiges are still found in Rimbaud’s emphatic exclamation, “il faut être absolument moderne.” For Rimbaud and modernist authors of varying movements who interact or try to reject romantic ideals, Robert notices an obsession with the new, of thinking that the past most be outdone, overcome, and vanquished. One must be weary of the trope of the tortured artist, for Robert has worked hard to avoid describing Kafka in this way, and it is why she returns time and again to the quixotic. Writing is the collusion

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64 Ibid., 7.
65 Robert, La Verité littéraire, 112.
of life and art, but when the two are blurred and when the weight of the literary and artistic past become too much of a burden, a conflict arrives. On this theme, Kafka offers “pas de remède seulement un diagnostique.”

The question becomes complicated when one speaks of life and of art. It is true that it is a sort of perpetual conflict, a struggle that cannot be resolved, but it is also a struggle present for writers before and after Kafka’s time. From Baudelaire’s *Albatros* to Sarraute’s *Fruits d’or*, the writer seems to strain to find a balance between life in the world and the life in a book. But Robert, as her discussion moves from life to art, asks a particularly apt question as regards not only Kafka, but any writer of this order: “D’où vient que le romancier soit tenu communément pour initié aux secrets de la vie et de la société, malgré l’inexpérience, la maladresse, l’aveuglement qu’il manifeste si souvent dans ses affaires privées?” This question fuels a great share of Robert’s criticism.

Robert analyzes the conflict between the writer and the world, between art and life, which is to say, the very place of art in life and the mysteries that enshroud it. From Kafka’s personal struggles to balance his art and his life Robert theorizes in a much wider context. It is here that Robert posits probing questions regarding art and the quixotic.

**Art and Religion: “L’écriture, forme de prière”**

Robert is not necessarily sympathetic to artists’ causes nor is she overly indulgent of their whims. In a fragment related to the idea of romantic artists’ narcissism, she refers to “l’orgueilleuse solitude de l’artiste.” From this vain solitude art is born, but the struggle itself seems hardly worth the personal suffering inflicted on life. Kafka and the

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66 Ibid., 116.
like are artists who, because of their art, “se retranchent du monde et mènent volontairement dans un ciel dérisoire une existence minable figée dans le parasitisme et la puérilité.”\textsuperscript{69} This mock paradise is in fact the truth that they are constantly pursuing though it can in no way be confirmed; the artist is “astreint au vrai” though it can “jamais lui être garantie.”\textsuperscript{70} The hopeless search for the truth is meant to justify the sacrifice of one’s life, though it is a lopsided consolation: “L’art n’est peut-être qu’une tentative pour dédommager la vie des torts qu’on lui fait, et l’artiste de ce qui lui manque pour vivre.”\textsuperscript{71} Robert addresses this question in the abstract, but it is to Kafka that she returns, perhaps reserving for him her harshest judgment: for Kafka, art was “le sacrifice total de sa vie;” in his literature Kafka “peuple son œuvre de figures d’artistes qui, à part leur obstination à poursuivre un but apparemment absurde, n’ont de remarquable qu’une faiblesse insigne, une impuissance définitive à vivre et une parfaite inutilité.”\textsuperscript{72} Such rhetoric may appear harsh, but Robert delivers a lengthy study to defend such a statement.

Robert is attempting to uproot the lingering remnants of German romanticism and the dogged pursuit of a hypothetical salvation carried on the wings of a devotion to art as if it were a religion. She recognizes that in recent literary history, “l’art usurpe la fonction de la religion” while at the same time being “condamné à l’échec.”\textsuperscript{73} This trend itself becomes a basic and irresolvable confusion between art and religion. It was Kafka himself who famously expressed, the phrase “Writing: form of prayer,” and it is noteworthy that both Robert and Blanchot have written essays on this single thought. It is

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\item \textsuperscript{69} Robert, \textit{Livre de lectures}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Robert, \textit{L’Ancien et le nouveau}, 310.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 301.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Robert, \textit{Livre de lectures}, 13.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Robert, \textit{Sur le papier}, 57.
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important to recognize Robert’s understanding that quixoticism intervenes in this ongoing conflict; art is often times the corruption of the one thing one holds sacred. If religion is sacred and art has come to replace religion in its power to grant salvation, then art becomes the path to salvation. But now art has become corrupt, leaving everything in a desecrated state, and yet it provides an opening for a new definition of art and new limits of the sacred, for “lorsque plus rien n’est sacré, n’importe quoi peut le devenir.”

Robert situates Kafka within art in the nineteenth century, specifically in the German Romantic tradition of replacing religion with art and literature, which has the tendency to divinize art. As has often been the case with the French view of Kafka, beginning with Maja Goth, Andre Breton, and including Sartre, Kafka’s writings have been grouped under the heading fantastic, surrealist, or oneiric. Robert, however, goes even further back, tracing the development of “la littérature onirique” beyond the surrealists and directly to the German romantics. In this respect, Robert finds many common points between Flaubert and Kafka, for they have both, to varying degrees, raised art to the level of religion, and in wrestling with good and evil it is “le style ou traitement du mal par le bien” which causes in the writing a fundamental “dérangement” of existence.

In reference to the “Hunger Artist,” it seems that Robert is describing not only Kafka or Flaubert, as she does so often, but the entire tradition of nineteenth century art and the left over trends of the romantics. When she notes that he (and he could be Kafka, Flaubert, the artist in a general sense or the Hunger Artist in particular)

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74 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 244.
75 Robert, Sur le papier, 59.
76 Robert, Les puits de Babel, 50.
77 Ibid., 119-20.
Ne procure à personne ni plaisir ni gain; se consommant lui-même, vivant ou plutôt mourant de lui-même, il n’a strictement rien a communiqué, sinon la suffisance et l’orgueil inhumain qui ascète sans loi, martyr sans cause à faire triompher, même la perfection à quoi il tend désespérément est une preuve de plus contre lui: détaché de tout objet digne d’effort, et condamné par là à la stérilité, son désir de perfection absolue ne fait qu’accélérer sa chute dans le néant.  

The artist who consumes himself in the name of a religion that has no divinity is comparable in Robert’s theory to a hermit without a faith, an ascetic without an order, a martyr without a cause. These are all images to which she often returns. This is an aporia of literature in Robert’s writing: the writer consecrates himself fully, with no reservations, to an order, a sect, a religion in which he has no faith. Doomed to failure and inconclusiveness, artists, in this guise, give themselves over all the more fully. There is no escape from this closed system, this circuitous give-and-take between life and art. It is like Blanchot’s circle deprived of a center and lacking an exterior; it seeks to locate its center all the while becoming pure movement. When one tries to define its limits one automatically fails because the working definition of this circle is that it has no limits.

According to this Romantic model, which Robert applies to modernism with its quest for the new and in which she sees Kafka as a sort of porte parole, art is the “ sphère mystique de la foi;” a “mandate” once again echoes Blanchot’s “exigency” of writing. She provides many examples of this idea, explaining that art has taken seriously its new role. Robert offers Flaubert as her proof of this claim; he is an author who is also “le mystique de qui ne croit à rien.” She repeats this argument through her entire career,

78 Robert, Livre des lectures, 26-27.
79 Robert, Sur le papier, 57.
80 Ibid., 60.
always finding a way to reapply it to Kafka. In Seul comme Kafka she refers to Kafka’s life and his art as a mysticism of those who are without belief.

She pursues new opinions and perspectives on what is essentially the same dilemma she analyses in L’Ancien et le nouveau. Literature is a sort of religion because “la chose écrite demande une foi naïve.” Don Quixote practices an “ascétisme délié de toute obéissance et purifié de toute magie qui caractérise la recherche d’une norme.”

Toward the end of her career, Robert synthesizes this argument exploring, as she does, the problems of faith, nineteenth century literature, and Kafka:

A la fin du siècle, l’art d’écrire joue pour de bon, et d’autant mieux qu’il s’émancipe des vieilles tutelles religieuses, le rôle de surrogat de la foi à quoi les hautes instances de la culture le destinent tacitement : il devient alors « une forme de prière » (Kafka), ou selon l’intuition profonde de Flaubert, « la mystique de qui ne croit à rien ».

To equate literature and religion is not the point of Robert’s study; instead she is trying to locate, dissect and perhaps move beyond the rather simplistic notion that one can find salvation in art, as the believer finds salvation in religion. The idea that grace or salvation “anime l’artiste” is, in the end, antithetical to Robert’s project. Blanchot meditated at length on this very question, linking it, much as Robert did, to Romanticism. Likewise, he uses Kafka as his anchor to affix many of his more abstract theories.

Blanchot, in “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre,” concludes that “l’art est d’abord la conscience du Malheur, non pas sa compensation.” Blanchot is very much in line with

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81 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 85.
82 Ibid., 154.
83 Robert, Livre de lectures, 128.
84 Robert, Sur le papier, 51.
Robert’s thinking on the matter, but it is not until the very end of *L’Ancien et le nouveau* that she manages to conclude that “l’art n’est pas le salut.”

Since art is not the locus of salvation, its purpose is seen in a decidedly less optimistic light in the thought of Robert. The fundamental situation of art is a “contradiction sans solution” and this fact is what stymies definitive or conclusive explanation of a given work of art. Art is not for salvation; it is simply a space where one can only hope to find truth in lies or to affirm statements through a constant series of negations; it does little more than “se tromp[er] tout en restant dans le vrai.” If we view this as a criticism and a movement away from the overly formalized modernist project, then, “de ce point de vue la désillusion constituée en technique est la dernière chance de la modernité…d’inspiration dont elle puisse honnêtement se dire favorisée.” Robert recognizes the chronic push to be always modern, novel and new, but she categorically refuses the outdated model of romanticism’s replacement of religion with art. Instead of finding salvation in art, the quixotic artist seeks a sort of transparency in it.

Restoring things to transparency is what K. struggles to do as he trudges through the snow of the Castle village, and his failure and exhaustion are his only recompense—hardly an encouraging moral. We can see Robert ironically elaborating the dead-end that presents itself within such a view:

> L’art ne naît pas d’une inspiration supérieure, mais bien de l’illusion puissante que l’artiste produit rien qu’en publant son intention d’en créer. Pour qu’on rassemble tant de gens autour du rien que j’ai sous les yeux, il faut que ce rien cache quelque chose d’extraordinaire, ou que, tout rien

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88 Ibid., 277
qu’il est, il soit chargé de significations absolument insoupçonnées, sinon pourquoi tout ce, et pourtant tant de solennité ?

With all due irony, Robert is taking up Kafka’s tone and cynicism regarding one of the lessons of “The Hunger Artist,” still, there is more than a grain of truth in what she is addressing because art remains possible. She concludes, after studying The Castle, “Josefine the Singer,” and “The Hunger Artist,” that “chacun d’eux représente la chance d’un recommencement dans des conditions plus probantes et par là même l’espoir d’un véritable issue.” Restarting, bordering on the Sisyphean infinite, renders the artist and the critic somehow happy, like Camus’ Sisyphus, even though the project itself is doomed by its very definition to the most abject failure.

If the goal (or a goal) of art is to continually try to find truth—to remove the masks separating the real from fiction—if this is the goal, “Le silence dont la littérature entoure ses privilèges et la nature de sa fascination, Kafka est paradoxalement le seul à le dénoncer ou tout au moins à le forcer à s’avouer.” Kafka, perhaps unconsciously, has hit the raw nerve of art’s goal, and he has done so through writing. His writing, void of clichés and artifice, finds the cleanest means to express the simple truth that he can only ever reveal part of the truth. There is not the truth or the whole, only a truth or a whole. Robert reveals that Kafka almost intuitively understands that art cannot compete with the world because “le monde a en effet pour lui d’être là, et quand même cet être-là ne serait que l’effet d’une illusion partagée, il en tirerait encore une énorme supériorité” over art.

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90 Ibid., 35.
91 Ibid., 42-43.
92 Ibid., 13.
93 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 187.
In *L’Ancien et le Nouveau*, Robert announces that the world has primacy over the fictional but in the same chapter she announces the opposite, that art will prevail over the world due to the shiftless nature of literary language. Rather than being an inconsistency in her thought, the two viewpoints are perfectly reconcilable and to understand to what degree, it is helpful to analyze the ways in which Robert studies the discourse of reality and illusion in the work of Kafka.

**The Real, The Fantastic**

We have commented that Robert found it revealing that Kafka found “nothing to say” about the anti-Jewish riots or the outbreak of war, but at the same time, he had always been interested in questions of reality so much so that his persistent silence never dodged these questions that reality demanded of him. If it is true that reality was a main concern for Kafka, Robert diagnoses the fact that it was also just beyond his reach, and she describes how “il rêve de la réalité comme de cela même dont un obstacle magie le tient séparé.”\(^94\) The magic obstacle was less magical than Kafka would have thought.

There was no hocus pocus separating him from the reality he sought, it was simply his over-active imagination. The vividness of his internal dream life was like a screen that led him to believe that reality was further away than it really was. Dreams and fantasy are perhaps the two most commonly attributed characteristic traits in Kafka’s work, and Robert has been diligent in giving these aspects their due but also to avoid reducing Kafka’s art to a too simple nomenclature, which is usually dubbed surrealistic.

A distinction Robert makes regarding Kafka and the surrealists is in the treatment of dreams. Kafka does not so much incorporate dreams into his fictional work as he

\(^{94}\) **Ibid.,** 231.
creates dream-like effects. His worlds are not surreal; they are terrifying for their utter lack of fantasy. Robert wishes to show “comment le rêve le distingue des surréalistes et romantiques”\textsuperscript{95} because “il s’interdit les espaces fabuleux, il écrit des histoires sans rêves.”\textsuperscript{96} Kafka writes about the world with such frightening precision that the reader mistakes this very precision for a dream. Robert eloquently states that “il se donne le moyen de dévoiler le jamais su sous le trop connu,”\textsuperscript{97} which recalls Robbe-Grillet’s \textit{Pour un nouveau roman}, where he argues that Kafka is one of the most realistic writers of the twentieth century. Refusing to admit that Kafka is an absurdist or a surrealist, Robbe-Grillet maintains that in Kafka’s stories, “L’effet d’hallucination provient de leur netteté extraordinaire, et non de flottement ou de brumes. Rien n’est plus fantastique, en définitive, que la précision.”\textsuperscript{98} It is true that Kafka’s descriptions are, owing to their precision, extremely realistic and at the same time mind-bendingly hallucinatory.

The absurdity of Kafka’s text (and perhaps the absurdity of Kafka criticism) comes not from fantastic imagery, dreams, or surrealistic mirages, but rather from the inscrutable logic, anti-logic, or dream logic that governs the tales. In \textit{The Trial}, Robert believes that “on ne peut plus douter que cette absurdité apparemment irréductible fait à elle seule la logique du roman.”\textsuperscript{99} Reading the long internal exegeses of the characters of \textit{The Castle}, “Investigations of a Dog,” or “In the Penal Colony,” it is clear that attention to observation is acute but that “des détails ne cadrent [pas].”\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{95} Robert, \textit{Puits de Babel}, 57.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, 58.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{100} Robert, \textit{L’Ancien et le nouveau}, 254.
The illogic that ensues and the agglomeration of detail and description allow Robert to describe a conflict between the real and the fictional, and later in the same chapter she refers to the complicity between the real and the fictional. Simultaneously conflicting and complicit, these statements are not as self-cancelling as they first appear, and we are reminded of the chaplain’s maxim to Joseph K. in *The Trial* that “the right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other.” What is clear above all is that it is language itself, literary language and the linguistic sign systems that account for “the right perception” and misunderstandings at the exact same time. What the eye perceives does not necessarily lead directly to a truth; again, to quote the Chaplain, “it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary.” Such a bleak conclusion, of course, leads Joseph K. to accuse the man of turning “lying into a universal principle.”

The concept of visual perceptions and the evidence of an imbalance between observation and truth are plainly visible in Kafka’s texts, argues Robert. A large majority of *L’Ancien et le nouveau* is devoted to this observation, but it has also been present throughout much of her Kafka writing. K. the Land Surveyor “ne comprend le réel concret que comme un objet de recherche et de convoitise,” but he is constantly failing to interpret it correctly, due to his status as a foreigner and his extreme solitude. K., the quixotic hero, “veut [pénétrer le monde], l’ébranler par la puissance de son regard,” but

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101 Ibid., 15.
102 Ibid., 44.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., 242.
the goal is elusive, it remains “où aucune critique n’a accès.”\textsuperscript{107} The penetration of reality is also a brushing aside of the literary past. The Land Surveyor qua quixotic hero qua surveyor of the literary past asks the reader to follow him “patiemment, à travers le labyrinthe d’images trompeuses et séduisantes qu’il suscite lui-même sous ses pas.”\textsuperscript{108}

It is in these seductive images that we are able to account for the way that Robert dissects Kafka’s writing technique, a technique that relies upon a “substitution de l’image au discours qui est effectivement l’une des propriétés les plus remarquables du rêve.”\textsuperscript{109} With Kafka, however, it is not dreams \textit{per se}, it is the language of fiction that exhibits “l’extrême condensation du langage qui fait de la prose de Kafka un extraordinaire instrument de précision”\textsuperscript{110} and evokes “un extrême réalisme de la description.”\textsuperscript{111} We can then see how the charm of Kafka lies in the way that “il allie le fantastique à l’observation scrupuleuse, méticuleuse, presque pédante des choses quotidiennes.”\textsuperscript{112}

This descriptive reality is dangerous for a critic because, in \textit{The Castle}, the architectural assemblage that dominates the landscape of the novel appropriates an allegorical meaning which can be detrimental to the understanding of the text as well as to any critical interpretation. Reality is present everywhere in Kafka’s writing, Robert informs us, but it is not a pure reality. It is reality to be distrusted, to be observed and dissected—a veiled reality. This is what literary language does, and Robert shows how “l’écriture s’entretient avec le réel” so as to “faire quelque chose en dehors du papier.”\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 49-50
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{110} Robert, \textit{Verité Littéraire}, 66.
\textsuperscript{111} Robert, \textit{L’ancien et le nouveau}, 9.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{113} Robert, \textit{Sur le papier}, 22.
Robert sees in Kafka’s cliché-free writing a demythologizing of the romantic model. Finally concluding an argument that she has made throughout her entire career, Robert addresses the question of art and romanticism in a gloomy coda:

Ainsi sous le regard perçant de l’écrivain que la littérature a plus qu’aucun autre possédé … l’illusion romantique se défait de tous côtés, et au moment où elle s’effondre les vraies questions commencent enfin à se poser. L’illusion doit se désagréger là où elle est le plus solidement ancrée, elle doit se démasquer de l’intérieur, c’est une nécessité absolue si la littérature ne veut pas rester « en l’air », perdue entre le ciel de sa démesure narcissique et la terre où elle n’a pas pied. Cette volonté de désillusionner exige l’emploi d’une technique impersonnelle qui permet de dresser un constat, à l’écart de toute polémique esthétique comme de toute idéologie.114

By changing the focus of the question from art and the artist to the domain of style and technique, Robert liberates Kafka’s work from the critical models and misunderstandings that have trapped it. Illusion must be eradicated and this is done in the realm of technique. The impersonal style to which she refers is in fact the manner in which Kafka composes not only his novels and stories but also his journals and correspondence. Robert cleverly positions Kafka in a place where he can be studied for what he is: a writer. Her analysis of his writing is one of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and insightful that exists.

**Style, Language, Writing**

Robert’s appreciation of Kafka’s writing and style is the axis around which many of her other arguments and observations revolve. Though it has been noted that Kafka, as a writer in what Robert identifies as the quixotic vein, relies on imitation in his writing, he has found a method to break with some longstanding trends in the novel: namely a certain neutrality. Robert is here exploring what she terms a “principe de neutralité qui

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commande son texte,”\(^{115}\) which excludes a defined era, opinions, and the personal feelings of an omniscient narrator. She refers to language without any color as “neutral” language, but it must be distinguished from Blanchot’s neutrality which will be explored in Chapter Three. The important theme for Robert is not Blanchot’s notion of a “voiceless” narrator which is the origin of literary language, but rather that “‘l’ensemble’ du livre ‘garde en effet une certaine opacité.’”\(^{116}\) She shows how Kafka’s writing exhibits an “impersonnalité poussée à l’extrême … mais elle a encore cet avantage de préserver le texte contre son plus gros risque de vieillissement exempt de couleur locale et de repères historiques.”\(^{117}\) Neutrality, which harkens back to one of the goals of art, is to provide transparency, here termed opacity—in the case of Kafka’s writing it is an analytic style, verging on the objective, which in terms of style, accent, and flourish, is neutral.

There are several important consequences for such neutral and opaque writing. Firstly, it is bewildering; the reader is jarred and even loses her bearings, for “rien n’est plus déconcertant”\(^{118}\) than Kafka’s view of language and the language that he uses—paradoxically, it is almost shocking in its banal, bureaucratic form. Such language, distanced from poetically charged and cliché-heavy writing of the literary past only amplifies what she refers to as the isolation of the modern writer. Solitude does appear with self-awareness and irony; Robert describes how Kafka’s style and neutral language, in conjunction with his absence of metaphor, begins to mocks itself. His language is both neutral and graceful because it “refuse de se parer et tire pourtant de là sa grâce.”\(^{119}\) And

\(^{115}\) Robert, La Verité littéraire, 93.
\(^{116}\) Ibid., 69.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., 94-95.
\(^{118}\) Robert, La Tyrannie de l’imprimé, 100.
\(^{119}\) Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 238.
if his language is neutral so are the objects and locations that fill his fictional world, leading Robert to conclude that even the Castle itself is “neutre.”

Because Kafka’s writing is neutral and “ne s’accompagne jamais d’une notation de valeur,” it is in no way clear if Kafka the author is taking the side of the Castle or of K., due in part to the crushing silence of any authorial judgment.

Robert traces this tendency “au narrateur du récit traditonnell, lequel qyant pour règle de ne pas intervenir dans les aventures de son héros,” but she also places him in the manner of narration made famous by Flaubert and the French novelists in the movements that came to predominance after the career of Balzac and realism. Making overt reference to Flaubert, she notices that in Kafka (and in much of modernist writing), “l’écrivain est partout, mais partout déplacé, privé de ses attributs … dénommés.”

Another consequence of Kafka’s denuded style and effaced narrator is a lesson shared among Kafka, Flaubert and a new generation of French post-war writers, namely that by removing a moralizing and judging narrative presence one removes with it a “système de valeurs implicites à quoi plus rien ne correspond dans le monde d’aujourd’hui.” Value has seeped out of the narrative just as it has seeped out of contemporary society. It is impossible to moralize or to offer a definitive judgment of value or even of success “parce que la narrateur, étant réelement un autre que lui, n’a pas la moindre avance, pas le moindre avantage sur le lecteur non informé.”

We will return to this point when we

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120 Ibid., 294.
121 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 198.
122 Ibid., 215.
123 Robert, Sur le papier, 49
124 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 208.
125 Ibid., 198.
take up, in the next chapter, George Szanto’s definition of narrative consciousness and examine how this narratological perspective can be studied and traced in the point of view and structure of the récits by Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot.

Kafka’s technique involves abstaining from the creation of a “narrator brimming with ideas”; even from his unpublished jottings he seems to have removed all ideas and opinions, disciplined by his “principe de non-intervention.” Because the narrator does not offer a path to follow, the book opens up a multitude of meanings and none of them are, in the end, definitive. Though we would like writing to be like a messenger who provides the link between “le monde invisible et le monde social, entre haut et bas, ici-bas et au-delà,” Robert can only describe the symbols and the signified object, but she has painstakingly worked to undo any unfair and mythologized connection that critics have attributed to Kafka’s work. It is to this line of thought that Barthes refers in his *Critical Essays* but Robert goes still further in a different essay in *Sur le papier*, this time providing a systematic critique, almost a polemic, against a decoding—word by word, image by image—of Kafka’s fiction.

If no direct exegesis is possible, all that remains is an arduous study of Kafka’s language. Robert cites Kafka’s opinion that “la langue … est notre éternelle bien-aimée” however, Robert theorizes that “cela ne signifie pas que nous vouons à la langue un amour éternel, mais que nous la poursuivons éternellement de nos assiduités, sinon en vain, du moins sans être sûrs de la posséder.” A vain pursuit is essentially what Robert

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is suggesting, and this relates to her earlier comments regarding the confusion of art and religion, or in this case she makes explicit reference to “ce mysticisme de la langue.”\textsuperscript{130}

Language, which Robert is using in this case as a synonym of writing and literature, is in fact a mystic’s pursuit; we are constantly in chase and never any closer—though it must also be admitted that we are never any further away from an explanation either. The hermeneutic process itself is infinite while paradoxically interrupting the series of exegeses since “le symbole pris isolément induit en erreur, parce qu’il incite à déchiffrer plutôt qu’à lire patiemment.”\textsuperscript{131} To “read on” is to pursue patiently Robert’s brand of faith, but interpretation, misled by curious symbolic analysis, interrupts one’s progress and sends one off into a labyrinth with no thread.

These metaphors—labyrinths—constitute one of Robert’s more important motifs. In dissecting Kafka, Robert brings to the fore the notion of interiority and subjectivity. As she concludes \textit{L’Ancien et le nouveau}, she makes reference to the nature of Kafka’s fictional universe being “entièrement intériorisé … de la subjectivité pure,”\textsuperscript{132} where life is the product of imagination. Noticing this internal realm, she quickly relates it to the concept of literature, specifically highlighting how so many of the characteristics of Kafka’s universe are internalized but at the same time pointing outward to bear witness to the “prétention exorbitante à rester éternellement vivantes et varies au milieu d’un monde qui change”\textsuperscript{133} which in turn points to the either/or of literature, or what she calls the “yes … but” of fiction. Kafka has always excelled at this mode of description and literary creation. She describes one of these processes as “l’expression signifiante de choses

\begin{footnotes}
\item[130] Ibid., 101.
\item[131] Robert, \textit{Livre de lectures}, 18.
\item[133] Ibid., 41.
\end{footnotes}
Robert recognizes that Kafka has systematically created a space where everything is questioned; such radical estrangement leads to a gamut of possibilities insofar as chronology, character and narration are concerned. When reading *The Castle*, for instance, even the order of the text can be questioned not only because Max Brod was only guessing when he compiled the chapters but also because, quite literally, *The Castle* can be read in any order in that the chronology and order of the conversations are arbitrary at best. In fact, this is raised to the level of a general structuralist principle because “l’intrigue du roman … ne progresse pas, mais se constitue à coups de répétitions et de variantes.” The unfinished quality of Kafka’s’ work, hinted at and used to sketch conclusions in the writings of Robert, will become a central focus in later chapters of this study as Blanchot’s theory is highlighted.

One of the greater implications of Robert’s study is the disintegration of the novelistic form which will be continued by the new novelists and other practitioners of the novel in the twentieth century. Narrators are displaced, chronology is jumbled and time is a relative force; in other words, Kafka, in the same vein as *Don Quixote*, has demonstrated how these attributes “Détourn[ent] le roman de ses voies propres, [le privent] des objets qui forment son matériel normal.” Its usual subject would of course be an Odyssean plot, a love story or an adventure but with too much subjectivity, literature becomes “gratuite et fragile, rien de décisif n’en peut sortir.” Gratuitous or not, overt subjectivity becomes a delicate conclusion to make. Kafka’s texts, as has been noted, are texts where Kafka is not only author and character, but where the entire

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134 Ibid., 129.
137 Ibid., 309.
endeavor is conducted in the interiorized space of his own fantasy. Under the pretext of “unmasking reality,” the quixotic hero is a character who never encounters a monster, “only the “enigma of daily existence: the unrelenting mystery of the known.”

With the author both subject and object, the tenets of the novel are exposed in their barest structural forms and any valid meaning dissolves into inexplicable aporia. Robert can only utter a question that cuts to the heart of many of the aforementioned dilemmas and to literature as it stands in the modern and post-modern era: “Est-ce à dire que la grandeur de la littérature ne peut plus consister que dans un grandiose constat de sa faillite?” “Ecrire n’est pas possible” she says, and, alluding to the imitative qualities of the quixotic writer, she finishes the thought by admitting “ce n’est qu’un instrument d’emprunt.” Such observations do nothing to solve the dilemma that is the paradox of the writer’s craft, for Kafka and the quixotic writer remain, “déchiré entre l’impossibilité d’écrire et la nécessité pressante d’écrire.”

Character and the Quixotic

If we describe Robert’s understanding of Kafka’s writing as 1) lacking a judging narrator and chronology; 2) composed in a neutral style; and 3) able to elide fixed meaning and instant validation, we will be able to trace the consequences of how she has evaluated the characters that inhabit this space. Though there are hundreds of characters who inhabit Kafka’s fictive universe, it can just as easily be said that there is only one: K.

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138 Robert, The Old and the New, trans.Carol Cosman, 26. This turn of phrase is slightly altered from Robert’s original: “mais l’incompréhensible et le familier, l’énigme du schéma quotidien, le mystère jamais conté du connu” (Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 31).
139 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 310
140 Robert, Sur le papier, 68.
141 Ibid., 68.
Don Quixote is Robert’s starting point, but she uses him only as a means of exposing K. to a more rigorous examination. Don Quixote, as constructed by Cervantes, is later re-imagined as a straw man by Robert until he becomes “le personnage absolu, la littérature incarnée.”\(^{142}\) If Don Quixote is complete, named, and a fully formed character—albeit mad and hopelessly lost in an imaginary world of his own devising—then K. is none of these things save irremediably lost. Lost not only in his fictional word, but lost in the realm of literary history. Robert diagnoses K., and it is with her description that a foothold will be established to reread Dans le labyrinthe and Blanchot’s fiction.

Robert recognizes in Kafka the beginning of an important trend in modernism and post-modernism, namely the disintegration of character. It will be stripped of its rank, its name, its distinguishing characteristics until it becomes, as Robert describes K., “un point nul de l’humain, un début absolu à partir de quoi tout est possible.”\(^{143}\) Such degree zeroes (points nuls) are seen in Robbe-Grillet, Blanchot, Beckett, Sarraute, Simon, etc., but they allude to the modernist tradition which includes Musil (to whom she explicitly refers), Robert Walser (whom she translated), and Kafka, whose characters are condensed down to the ad hoc K. who himself becomes “l’homme véritablement sans qualités.”\(^{144}\)

The fact that Robert observes how Kafka creates “characters without attraction of any kind”\(^{145}\) signals the future figures of Robbe-Grillet, Beckett, and Blanchot more than those of Sartre or Camus—the former are not symbols of their era’s existential crisis but rather vague, undefined characters, they hint at ontological space rather than summarizing society’s ills. K. is a character who “fascinates by the inexplicable gaps in

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\(^{142}\) Robert, Sur le papier, 17.
\(^{143}\) Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 233.
\(^{144}\) Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 15.
\(^{145}\) Ibid., 6
his characterization,” which becomes in and of itself, a sort of “obsessive enigma.”

Being named or unnamed is less important than any symbolic currency with which a character might be imbued. The characters are templates, place holders in a barren narratological space. Aimlessness and a lack of origin are their defining traits, as Robert describes K.; it is someone who “ne porte pas sur lui les signes habituels de la grandeur et de l’élection.” He is rootless in every sense of the word, his identity is nothing more than “Land Surveyor” which is absurd since he never has the chance to exercise this trade, much like Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier is a soldier in name and in almost no other way.

Identity, in Robert’s analysis, is established by names, however, and as is well known, Kafka deprived his characters of a name. From Joseph K. to K., all that is left is a single letter, a stand-in that could be an abbreviation for a longer name just as easily as it could be a stand in for the first person pronoun I. What is clear to Robert is that characters are little more than “pensées agitées” who suffer from “la maladie du nom”—they have no name, no signifier other than a letter which becomes, at best, a narrative place holder. They are not a fully formed identify. Whereas Robert suggests that K.’s character is indeed the missing or absent author, this absence is the very trademark of Robbe-Grillet which can only be filled by the reader’s expectations of what a character is supposed to be or do. Blanchot, as we shall discover in later chapters, uses a more subtle process, one that is deeply rooted in his ontological pursuits; his is the quest for the very ontology of literary language.

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146 Ibid., 6
147 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 175.
148 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 15.
Though K. has no name to speak of, a rich vocabulary of names in Kafka’s fiction makes K.’s anonymity all the more bracing (which evokes, once more, the Soldier or Blanchot’s nameless speakers of his later récits). In contradistinction to Achilles, Ulysses, or King Arthur, K. has no sign of election, he simply appears on the scene of reading as if created out of thin literary air. Lacking a name reveals “les dessous obscurs du langage,”¹⁴⁹ and this, Robert maintains, is the direct inheritance from Kafka’s Jewish heritage. Whereas in this religious tradition, one has always been forbidden to name God—hence the tetragram¹⁵⁰—Kafka twists the tradition so that now “la grande affaire n’est plus de taire le nom divin, mais bien plutôt de cacher le sien.”¹⁵¹ Robert believes that a character was created without a name by an author who wishes above all to efface his own identity, his existence.¹⁵²

Robert says that Kafka’s Jewish origins are “vidé[s] de toute substance et de tout sens” and that he was torn between language and culture.¹⁵³ What she aims at revealing is the depth to which Kafka has been marked by his Jewish upbringing but at the same time, the lengths to which he strove to remove them from his fiction. The struggle that exists in the domain of language and culture was experienced acutely by Kafka himself and does appear in his fiction, especially, in Robert’s opinion, in The Castle. K. arrives at the Village by way of the wood bridge to a culture he does not understand and where communication is at best pointless and at worst self-condemning. These conditions have

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¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 22
¹⁵⁰ In the Jewish faith, it is forbidden to know or pronounce the name of God, as such a four letter symbol holds the place of the name, Adonai, “my Lord.”
¹⁵¹ Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 22
¹⁵² Ibid., 22-23.
¹⁵³ Ibid., 23.
been read by many commentators as an allegory for Kafka’s own alienation as a Jew in Prague, and Robert restricts the metonymy to the Barnabus family, the Village’s outcasts.

The word Jew does not appear in any of Kafka’s fiction and Kafka was silent regarding the events of his own lifetime regarding the status of the Jew in society. Robert shows how Kafka’s Judaism was in fact an inner struggle that played itself out in extended journal entries, and a later-in-life appreciation of Yiddish, instruction in Hebrew, and support of Zionism. All the same, Robert manages to read a fundamental Judaism into Kafka’s characters not to be found in any particular religious adherence or spiritual practice, but rather in the very rootless wanderings that mark K. or the Barnabas family. This last family is the pariah of the Castle Village, excluded and socially undesirable, and they best represent the Jews that were never mentioned in Kafka’s text.

Broken down to its essence, The Castle is nothing more than the story of a solitary man with a mysterious goal trudging through the snow; but this is just as good a description of Dans le labyrinthe as it is of The Castle. But trudging through the snow hardly seems to encapsulate the real experience of this nameless, origin-less, wandering fictive creation. K. thinks he has a goal and direction but he is truly wandering, an errant quester who lacks a real, meaningful quest. The frustration of his endeavor is that “K. compose un labyrinthe dont le fil conducteur semble lui échapper constamment.” The word compose is of utmost importance because it seems to place the blame and guilt on K. alone, not on the town and not on fate. Like all of Kafka’s characters and like Kafka himself, “il n’apprend la loi que par la sentence qu’elle prononce contre lui dans les

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154 Robert, Sur le papier, 55.
profonderus de sa chair,” which is to say, it is learned too late. K.’s sentence may be less harsh than the sentence literally carved into the flesh of the guard “In The Penal Colony,” but his sentence is carried out in the snow, in the cold, by the harsh treatment he receives from the townspeople, and ultimately in the utter oblivion he finds himself lost within, drifting down the corridors of the inn with no job, no wife, and no prospects.

From the beginning to his ignominious end, K. must carve his own path with no guide, hence he exists in a chronic state of error passing from mirage to mirage. K. does not see what everyone else takes for granted, and to repeat what Robert said about the comedy of manners which is one possible genre to which The Castle can belong, K. acts as nothing more than a “paria … il fait ce qui ne « se fait » pas.” He is an “étranger [qui rompt] la loi du silence” in a village inhabited by “des gens ordinaires, par définition plus épris de paix que de vérité.” When the truth is impossible to find anyway, the reader is hard pressed to find fault with their attitude. The only real event that K. encounters is conversation; and it is endless, convoluted, logically impenetrable chatter. Robert believes that “K. est donc l’Arpenteur des livres,” a man who seeks to reenact an adventure, but talk and explanation have exhausted him in the final analysis. It should come as no surprise that similar instances of conversation will be theorized and put into practice by Blanchot; Aminadab in particular and most of his fiction in general are just as rootless and dependent on dialogue as is The Castle.

Whereas Ulysses and Perceval, to use Robert’s examples, are heroes where the reader expects and reads to learn of their triumphant return, the quixotic hero, and K. in

155 Robert, Seul, comme Franz Kafka, 139.
156 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 266.
157 Ibid., 189.
158 Ibid., 200.
particular, is a hero “d’une Arrivée impossible et non pas d’un Retour réussi.” 159
Blanchot will theorize K.’s remarkable appearance on the wooden bridge, and it seems
Robert was hinting at as much, but K. seems to be created out of nothing and to be
pushed forward into a literary maelstrom with no possible hope for success, hence the
impossibility of his arrival and no mention of his return. In the end, nothing is learned.
The reader, like K., has made no progress, learned absolutely nothing, and this failure has
come “au prix de trop de fatigues.” 160 Value, meaning, and the character are all
exhausted. The word exhausted has a double meaning: a physical fatigue sets in but also
everything has been reset to zero, utterly emptied of all meaning, goal and purpose—a
sort of radical complication of the literary terrain.

Kafka is the literary figure around whom Robert elaborates her entire theory, and
he provides us with a useful prism for understanding her many ideas regarding
modernism, literary history and the future of the novel and of reading. She has
demonstrated the important elements of genre and how, even when a literary genius
wishes to move beyond them, there are still traces of old styles that cannot be eradicated
from a given text. Thus, she returns frequently to such genres as the Grail Quest,
detective fiction, the comedy of manners, and, of course, the epic. Robert carefully shows
how it is around the character that language, genre, and the literary past can be traced,
evaluated, and reread into a myriad of new novels and characters. Robert is singularly
important for her resistance to clichéd readings of old texts and also for her refusal to see
in any text a single, definitive interpretation. Robert offers a unique point de départ in

159 Ibid., 218.
160 Ibid., 197.
order to reread any text, but specifically texts which are clearly inspired by reading or theorizing Kafka. With this in mind, I will use Robert as a springboard to reread the novels of Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot, and to confront the paradoxes and pitfalls that swirl around Kafka, criticism, and the interpretations of the novel.
A movement without end,
A restlessness transmitted from the restless element
To helpless human beings and their works!
Franz Kafka, Amerika

Chapter 2:
Illusions and Allusions in Dans le labyrinthe and Aminadab

This chapter will pursue an analysis of the critical framework of Marthe Robert, the reader of Kafka, across the terrain of French literature. We will reduce the scope of this terrain by focusing on two novels that are ripe with allusions not only to the themes, style, and content of Kafka’s fiction, but which also gain in depth and coherence in light of Robert’s writings on Kafka. To this end, we will examine Dans le labyrinthe by Alain Robbe-Grillet and Maurice Blanchot’s Aminadab as novels that not only lend themselves to a Robertian critique but are also undeniably indebted to Kafka. One approaches such novels with circumspection. We will keep in mind Deleuze and Guattari’s observation regarding the work of Kafka, which echoes Robert’s earlier observation, that much of literature, modernist or otherwise, is, in the final analysis, destined to inconclusiveness. Deleuze and Guattari, in reference to Kafka’s “The Burrow,” muse that “Le principe des

entrées multiples empêche seul l’introduction de l’ennemi.” They are skeptical of attempts to assign definitive meanings to “le Signifiant, et les tentatives pour interpréter une œuvre qui ne se propose en fait qu’à l’expérimentation.” Like Robert, who wrote before their study, Deleuze and Guattari find that there is no final explanation of Kafka; one can only experiment. It is from this spirit of experimentation that I will draw in reading *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*.

**Robbe-Grillet, Kafka, and the Critics**

Robbe-Grillet mentions Kafka explicitly in several essays of *Pour un nouveau roman*. In this collection of essays written over a decade and published in 1963, Robbe-Grillet outlines what he perceives as the shortcomings of the traditional novel and advances what amounts to a sustained *mise-en-question* of conventional ideas of plot, character, and narration. Though Robbe-Grillet evokes Kafka’s work in these essays, it is especially his fiction that invites comparisons to the writings of Kafka. Critics who have sought to explicate the work of Robbe-Grillet noted certain parallels, and have signaled similarities in the description of architecture and staircases, the use of dream-like situations, and employment of whips and other sadomasochistic allusions.

Robbe-Grillet’s novels reflect what can be found in Kafka’s fiction in terms of imagery, content, and formal structures. Robbe-Grillet’s fourth novel, published in 1959, is the story of a subjectivity sitting in a room constantly evoking the streets of the city around him. In these streets, the writer recounts the wanderings of an exhausted soldier attempting to return a box wrapped in paper to the family of his fallen comrade in arms.

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3 Ibid.
First of all, there is no agreement among critics as to the nature of *Dans le labyrinthe*. They do admit that it is a “new novel” in so far as it questions and complicates traditional conceptions of character, plot, chronology, place, and narrative in general, but they cannot agree on what the primary meaning of the novel is—if there is one at all. Is it an important treatise on referentiality and finality as Smith writes?"4 Is it a reflection on literature and the technique of doubling as Morissette posits?"5 Or even a critique of post-war and postmodern society and anonymity as Stoltzfus maintains?"6 The answer is naturally that it is all of these things. No single critic pretends to offer the definitive reading of *Dans le labyrinthe*, but rather each one gives a particular reading of it."7

Morissette, Stoltzfus, Hoesterey, Cohn, and Szanto have all connected Robbe-Grillet to Kafka. These links may be tenuous or well-researched but there has been no thematic consistency to the similarities discovered between these two writers. Morissette and Stoltzfus, two of the leading critics of Robbe-Grillet, offer passing reference to Robbe-Grillet’s appreciation of Kafka, but do not detail how he pays homage to Kafka, nor do they outline any traces of influence in the French writer’s fiction. A more concrete link may be the sado-masochistic use of whips in *The Trial* and *Projet pour une révolution à New York* cited in Hoesterey’s study, which is, in the final analysis, more preoccupied with Kafka than with Robbe-Grillet. Cohn’s “Castles and Anti-Castles”

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offers a quite unified approach to Robbe-Grillet, which studies resemblances in character,\(^8\) representation of objects and places,\(^9\) and finally “figural perspective.”\(^{10}\) This last point is common between Cohn and Szanto, though in the latter’s lengthy study, he names this perspective “Narrative Consciousness.”

Tracing the peculiarity of narrative perspective to Gustav Flaubert and Henry James, Cohn unites Robbe-Grillet and Kafka in a concrete narratological field, calling it “K’s perspective,” and she acknowledges “the influential role that Kafka’s novels may have played in the structural evolution of Robbe-Grillet’s oeuvre.”\(^{11}\) Szanto explores this very structural development in the works of Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet detailing just what marks a “narrative consciousness.” It is a reduced perspective, a third-person point of view so restricted that it is essentially no different from a first-person perspective. Szanto, like Cohn, finds the origins of this technique in Flaubert and James, but concludes that Kafka is the real master of this technique and demonstrates how Beckett and Robbe-Grillet are indebted to Kafka.

In his analysis of narrative techniques, Szanto traces the use of a reduced perspective directly to Kafka. What this means in terms of the story of a (modernist) fiction written with such narrative consciousness is that the reader can know no more than the character. When K., for instance, wanders around the village the reader can only

\(^8\) Cohn claims that “the only Robbe-Grillet character who may be said to resemble Kafka’s K. is Wallas of The Erasers,” a claim I am prepared to question (Cohn, 21).

\(^9\) Cohn claims these places are mythical and unlocateable in any geographical way (Cohn 22-23).


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
see what K. sees and speculate along the same lines of logic that K. proposes.  

Though the lack of judgment may be evident, one notices a certain irony but any irony in Kafka or Robbe-Grillet is less accentuated than it is in Flaubert, for one. Szanto provides numerous examples to demonstrate how Robbe-Grillet and Samuel Becket are indebted to Kafka for this technique.  

As was discussed in the preceding chapter, Robert was instrumental in outlining and synthesizing Kafka’s narrative techniques, among a host of other themes. Both Szanto and Robert converge on several crucial points as to what they observe in Kafka’s narrative constructions, characteristics which include a reduced point of view, the elimination of any judgment or value from the narrating presence, and the notion that all perspective, opinion, and action is wholly reduced to the character’s being—the reader is unable to see, know, feel, or experience anything that the character him or herself does not directly undergo. Due to these stylistic choices, there is necessarily a lack of value judgment, hence the marked reduction in ironic posturing compared with Flaubert.  

Szanto argues that Robbe-Grillet’s perspective is directly attributable to Kafka in such works as *Le Voyeur, La Jalousie*, and *Dans le labyrinthe*. Because Mathias in *Le Voyeur* erases from his memory the supposed murder of Violet (or perhaps Jackie), the reader has neither proof of this crime nor a frame of reference beyond that of the character. The same process is at work in *La Jalousie* where the narrative is restricted to

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12 Jean-Paul Sartre makes a similar observation regarding Kafka in his *Situations I*, though he is not interested in this narrative technique throughout the history of the novel and he concentrates uniquely on Kafka and Blanchot, a point we will revisit in the second half of this chapter.  
13 Another of the important contributions made by Szanto is his insight and use of Robert’s theories, even citing their personal correspondences.
the line of sight of the narrator/husband. When he turns his head or lets his mind delve into memory, stray thoughts, and fantasy, the reader is left totally at his mercy.

Szanto does not study _Dans le labyrinthe_ in nearly as much detail as Robbe-Grillet’s other works, and it is surprising to what degree critics are quick to draw a parallel between Kafka and Robbe-Grillet without examining the structural forms supporting this novel in comparison to Kafka’s work. One reason that Szanto may be hesitant to do so is the challenging position of the narrator in _Dans le labyrinthe_ as compared to Robbe-Grillet’s other novels. As compared to his three previous efforts, _Les Gommes_ (1953), _Le Voyeur_ (1955) and _La Jalousie_ (1957), _Dans le labyrinthe_ (1959), has a modified narratological form. The two preceding novels are much more unified in their approach—everything is seen and thus processed and recounted through the perspective of a character-narrator—Mathias in _Le Voyeur_ and the husband in _La Jalousie_. _Dans le labyrinthe_ offers a new layer to the telling of the tale. There is a first-person voice that begins the *récit* in a small dusty room, furnished with a lamp, various bric-a-brac, a window facing the street (outside of which it may or may not be raining, snowy, or sunny), and lastly a painting entitled “*la défaite à Reichenfalls.*” These items are incorporated into the telling of _Dans le labyrinthe_ leading to the conclusion that the novel is not a tale about a soldier lost in a foreign land but instead is the story of a writer lost in the labyrinthine constructions of a fictional creation. There is no textual guarantee that the story recounted in the pages is a pure invention of the _je_ or if the ambiguity of this _je_ is in fact recounting an event that he (_je_) has just witnessed firsthand as the doctor,
the limping man (*l’infirme*), or a bourgeois gentleman, all of whom are evoked throughout the text.

The writer/narrator aside, Robbe-Grillet is telling, in his own fragmentary way, the tale of a soldier trudging through the snow-covered, labyrinthine streets of a city totally unknown to him. Except for the opening line, “Je suis seul ici …” and the closing ten pages, there is no mention of a first person or of a writer.\(^1\) The 200 central pages of the story are remarkably consistent not only with Robbe-Grillet’s prior two novels in terms of point of view, but also with Szanto’s estimation of narrative consciousness. What is more, Robbe-Grillet’s narrative structure is wholly in line with what he have previously outlined as Robert’s understanding of Kafka’s narrative technique, which is to say 1) the neutrality of style; 2) the lack of judgment on the part of the narrator; 3) the relative flexibility of chronological order in the telling of the story; 4) the creation of character; and 5) the ambiguity of genre.

**Robert’s Kafka: Structures in Robbe-Grillet**

Robert, in her many studies of Kafka, has outlined several principal elements in Kafka’s style. The first is what she calls neutrality of style. This means that Kafka’s writing is fairly void of metaphor, of complicated vocabulary or of confusing rhetorical flourishes. She has, in fact, compared his work to an administrative report in terms of word usage and sentence formation. A second characteristic is the freedom of the chronology; Kafka’s books can, in essence, be arranged in any order, and the fragments and addenda can be read independently or inserted into the text almost at random—the

\(^1\) Only the occurrence of the negation “*non*” as if the thoughts of the writer/narrator were a maze and he has just come upon a dead end, a construction we will analyze in Chapter Four.
debate regarding the accuracy of Max Brod’s ordering of Kafka’s novels attests to this observation. Thirdly, she notes the absence of judgment from the narrating voice; this we have just outlined in our discussion of Szanto and the narrating consciousness. Lastly, she describes the content of Kafka’s work which has been vulgarized and perverted through the misuse of the adjective *kafkaïen.*

In a notable passage on Kafka, Robert remarks that *The Castle*, like *The Trial*, can be read in any order. Robbe-Grillet’s fiction radicalizes what Robert’s criticism proposes. In *Dans le labyrinthe* no coherent chronology can be mapped out, just as in *la Jalousie*, no coherent blueprint of the house can be drawn. The peregrinations of the Soldier, the order of the events, and the sequence of encounters can only be divined, never truly known. Robert establishes this break with the literary past and describes how Kafka is challenging the literary tradition of realism and direct, one-for-one mimesis, as well as a realist cause and effect. In this respect, Kafka’s writing offers a nearly perfect precedent for Robbe-Grillet’s own quest “pour un nouveau roman.” In his theoretical writings, Robbe-Grillet acknowledges the importance of rethinking, reconstituting, and reshaping what is possible in the chronology and telling of a tale.

Kafka’s neutrality of style, his metaphor-free writing, and his deceptively uncomplicated vocabulary create the feeling that one is confronting a certain kind of bureaucratic report. It is imaginable that Robbe-Grillet’s detractors would not even allow his fiction to be given such a flattering title as report, but would prefer to describe it as a sort of maddening geometry problem. Be that as it may, his style, as explicitly described

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15 A second part to this study will follow that will include a probing look into the fundamental structures of Kafka’s content and his universe and how their elements reappear in later French fiction. Such a study will necessarily examine the consequences in genre, character, and the space of fiction.
in the prologue to *Dans le labyrinthe*, requires the reader to disengage from the search for metaphors, symbolism, psychoanalytic themes, and even meaning: “Le lecteur est donc invité à n’y voir que les choses, les gestes, paroles, événements qui lui sont rapportés, sans chercher à leur donner ni plus ni moins de significations que dans sa propre vie ou sa propre mort.” This preamble is signed A. R.-G. as if to prevent the reader from attributing it to the imagined author who has presumably penned the text that follows. Such a note serves as a pre-emptive move to preserve *Dans le labyrinthe* from the fate that befell Kafka’s corpus, according to Robert, namely an over-indulgence in commentary; an unchecked, undisciplined proposal of intended meaning and the ascribing of allegory or metaphor to a text capable of standing on its own. This is to say, in Robert’s words, committing the sin of exegesis.

Any author, in composing a neutral style, is likely endeavoring to recreate, in one sense or another, the Flaubertian credo that “l’artiste doit être dans son œuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout puissant ; qu’on le sente partout, mais qu’on ne le voie pas.”

Critics examining the narratological processes of Robbe-Grillet mention his debt to Flaubert—and other modernist writers such as Henry James, Virginia Wolf, James Joyce, and Kafka. Robbe-Grillet’s narrators, deprived of the all encompassing free indirect discourse and biting irony of Flaubert, are more silent, more absent, and less judging than Flaubert’s. It is in this sense that Robbe-Grillet most resembles Kafka.

With regard to the content of Robbe-Grillet’s novels, it seems that *Dans le labyrinthe* bears the closest resemblance to Kafka’s *The Castle*. First and foremost, the

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story of a solitary wanderer, trudging through the snow engaged in a misadventure that the reader may understand as doomed from the very beginning to pointlessness unites these books by theme. But other tangents also conjoin them, the childlike guides, for instance. Whereas K. is “aided” by Barnabas and plagued by the infantile, incorrigible assistants Arthur and Jeremiah, Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier is guided through the streets by a young boy of indeterminate age.

The Soldier, like K., is worn down by his perpetual walking through the snowy streets. He suffers from an unconquerable fatigue; he rarely sleeps and when he does he is troubled by nightmares and suffers from fever and delirium. He even nods off during a visit to a café that is evoked frequently in the story. This scene is in fact a reflection of the two inns visited by K. The first, the Bridge Inn, is where K. arrives to sleep the first night but is allowed no respite—he is awoken often and barely falls asleep before being forced to talk on the phone in order to clarify the fact that he lacks the permission necessary from the Castle to stay anywhere at all. The Herrenhof is the second inn where he stays with his new wife before being kicked out by the landlady. He finally settles at the school, a setting whose institutional feels is reflected in the barracks where the Soldier of Dans le labyrinthe spends the night. Though he seems as out of place there as does K.’s makeshift family trying to sleep (and stay warm) in the school house.

If we may generalize about the Kafka-like character, he is fatigued and in search of repose, yet any space designated for sleep becomes foreign, ill-suited to the activity that it was in fact designed for, and in the end, painful; it only aggravates the existing condition of fatigue instead of alleviating it. The fact that Robbe-Grillet’s soldier feels so
out of place in the barracks reveals one more important structural similarity between these two: as outsider, the questing character never belongs to any other community than his own. Kafka’s personal anxieties and feelings of isolation, alienation and loneliness have been read into K.’s utter inability to gain any footing in the Castle or the Village. In Robbe-Grillet’s case, no one truly believes that the Soldier is a surrogate for Robbe-Grillet himself, but the Soldier’s position in society is just as tenuous as K.’s. Firstly, he is not entirely trusted—he may even be a traitor or a deserter. His unfamiliarity with the town makes him a stranger and interrupts his ability to engage the townspeople in any meaningful way—communicatively, militarily, or emotionally. Lastly, his taciturn demeanor does not inspire confidence. He rarely speaks and only offers halting, confused, and incomplete answers to even the most basic questions that he is posed, which in turn, leads the denizens to assume that he is a spy, a deserter, or a traitor.

Both K. and the Soldier’s status as outsider is signaled outright by their name. K. is known only by his initial and is most commonly referred to by the townspeople by his professional title, Land Surveyor. The Soldier does not even have this much. He is only signaled by the second person pronoun, sometimes formally and sometimes informally. The narrator himself gives him nothing personal and nothing unique; he is called only soldat, or sometimes l’homme. The man who functions as protagonist of these tales sallies forth on a quest, a seemingly infinite mission whose infinitude and challenge is only amplified by all of the aforementioned attributes of content. The quest, the illness, and the distrust of the townspeople compose a part of one of Robert’s most important inquiries into The Castle, which is the subject of genre. Robert discusses the theme of
genre in *L'Ancien et le nouveau*, devoting parts of the chapter “The Last Messenger” to
the question of whether Kafka’s posthumous novel belongs to a genre such as the fairy
tale, the comedy of manners, or the epic, before pursuing an examination as to whether it
is consistent with the *Odyssey*, at least as a traditional journey. I will pursue her study of
*The Castle* and *Perceval* and reveal how her findings lay bare some of the literary
mechanisms upon which Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le Labyrinthe* is constructed.

**Perceval and Kafka’s Holy Grail**

By questioning genre we can begin to interrogate the importance of the Grail and
the Grail quest to the reading of certain modernist themes; what can these traditionally
established genres reveal to the modern reader about contemporary problems such as the
inconclusiveness of meaning, the lack of transcendent truth, and the absence of temporal
and spatial unity? In order to form a framework to re-read *The Castle* and *Dans le
Labyrinthe* in a different light, we can analyze the structures of Perceval. The *Perceval*
tale is rich and complicated, but it must be noted that Robert distills the tale to its
structural base in *L'Ancien et le nouveau*, her study of *Don Quixote* and *The Castle*.

Composed at the end of twelfth century by Chrétien de Troyes but never finished,
*Perceval* was later retold and concluded by the German Wolfram Von Eschenbach at the
beginning of the thirteenth century. The tale is ostensibly the story of an apprenticeship.
It tells of the young knight Perceval’s passage from ignorance to knowledge, from doubt
to certainty, from coarseness to refinement. *Perceval* is the story of a young man slowly
attaining knightly ideals. Knights and the chivalresque tradition were unknown ideas to
the child, though he was slowly initiated into this tradition. As a young and not fully
trained knight, he receives important advice that he stubbornly adheres to and whose wisdom he never second-guesses: “Gardez-vous aussi de vous abandonner au bavardage et au commérage. A trop parler on ne peut manquer de dire quelque chose qu’on vous impute à bassesse. Comme le dit si bien le proverbe: ‘A trop parler, faute on commet.’”

The same advice is concisely shared in Wolfram as, “Do not ask many questions.”

Upon receiving this counsel, Perceval continues his quest, seeking his mother. Before he finds her, he encounters a flooded river where an old Angler offers him rest and lodging in a nearby castle. Perceval is treated handsomely by the owner of this dwelling, an ailing King. While being feted in the castle, a parade of servants and maidens files past him, bearing a bloody spear and a Grail. Though Perceval is consumed by a burning curiosity about these relics, he restrains himself from asking any questions, heeding the advice he earlier received. He beds down for the night, but the following morning he discovers that the castle is abandoned. Only a page remains who, Wolfram relates, curses Perceval: “‘Damn you, wherever the sun lights your path! …You silly goose! Why didn’t you open your gob and ask my lord the questions? You’ve let slip a marvelous prize!’” After this rebuke, Perceval seeks more information, but he is “left without an answer,” because, Chrétien writes, “c’est folie de parler ainsi, car nul n’a l’intention de lui répondre.”

19 Ibid., 131.
20 Chrétien, tr. Ribard, Le Conte du Graal, 73.
For all intents and purposes, Robert’s theory of the Grail legend concludes at this point. Chretien de Troyes’s tale ends before the Grail is recaptured. However in the German version, Parzival learns the questions he was meant to ask, even though it takes him ten years to accomplish his quest and, throughout this episode, he loses and later regains his Christian faith. He finally achieves a state of grace in the world and becomes the custodian of the Grail. Considering the Grail epic in this light, I will now turn to the way in which Robert uses it as one of many possible ways to read Kafka’s *The Castle*.

In Robert’s introduction of the Grail quest one element is favored in particular, the character—the heroic protagonist who serves as apprentice, knight errant, and guide. She describes the protean quality of the grail hero; he “porte bien des noms et change souvent de figure — pour apprendre un secret qui lui sera révélé, et à lui seul, s’il obéit aux lois de la Quête et remplit les conditions préétablies.”21 This quest becomes “une épreuve tout intérieure, demandant moins la richesse et la force que le dévouement, la foi, l’humilité.”22 The Grail hero, according to Robert, is not a hero in the traditional sense. He is not as strong as Achilles, not as cunning as Ulysses, nor even as self-assured (even if it is in a comically or insanely confident manner) as Don Quixote. He is chosen, fated even, against his will, to be a hero that he is not necessarily qualified to be.

Robert applies these traits of the Grail quest to *The Castle* and she offers a convincing reading of *The Castle* as K.’s personal Grail quest23. She suggests that K.’s ordeals are, in their own way, an imitation of the Perceval legend, and carefully

22 Ibid.
23 In fact, Robert is just trying genres “on for size.” She is no more convinced that reading *The Castle* as a Grail quest is the final reading of *The Castle* as she is that it is a rewriting of any other genre, be it Comedy of Manners, Journey, Fairy Tale, Fable, or negative theology.
superimposes K. the Land Surveyor over the Grail tradition, explaining how he has “venu au village par hasard ou par erreur, mais en fait guidé par le destin, il ne le quitte qu’il n’ait rétabli l’accès à l’Autre Monde … et par là même, guéri le pays de ses fléaux.”

Robert is refuting not only the transcendental conclusions of the Grail legends, but also one of the most common critical readings of *The Castle*, one informed by the ideas of negative theology—the reading that the Castle’s persistent silence is allegory for God’s silence, death, or absolute inexistence. Robert refutes as too banal the idea that the only and ultimate reading of *The Castle* is one that presents the castle as God or grace, and that the novel is in fact K.’s struggle to enter heaven or find a state of grace. What she does do, however, is to maintain an analogy between the Grail and the castle by seeing in K. “celui qui, mettant fin aux enchantements de la neige et de l’hiver perpétuels, ramènera la lumière dans ce pays de ténèbres.”

She suggests that a land deprived of the Grail will wither away and become a wasteland, an impoverished, famine-stricken region of darkness, alienation, and sorrow. Though the description center around the castle and the forsaken village that surrounds it, Robert underlines the solitude and shadowy nature of K.’s quest; “Personne ne le lui dit, personne ne lui indique son but ou lui en confie même le nom. Il ne manque rien à sa quête, sauf le Graal lui-même; aussi, dépourvue de fin et de chemin, doit-elle rester à l’état de rêve ou de pur projet.”

The implications of this statement appear in Kafka’s style, his art made manifest in the doubtful, self-examining nature of the prose and the character’s speculation. Of course, K. is impotent in the face

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25 Ibid., 213.
26 Ibid.
of his quest and, despite his struggles, K. “ne retrouvera pas le chemin du Château, [et] jamais le Graal ne lui apparaîtra, même incompréhensible et voilé.”

Pursuing her observations about K. and the epic quest, Robert explains how K. fails in his Grail quest for the opposite reason that Perceval failed in his original attempt. Whereas Perceval fails because he is “trop timide ou trop peu mûr pour participer à la souffrance du Graal, s’abstient des questions fatidiques qui eussent permis de l’initier,” K.’s failure owes to something else; his “excès de paroles n’a [que] des conséquences fâcheuses,” which include being homeless, without work, and ultimately without hope “parce qu’il l’empêche de poser en temps voulu les questions fatidiques.” It was noted that the Grail has the power to restore a barren wasteland to its former fertility, and Robert summarizes that, traditionally, the Grail “ne tend pas à suspendre les lois naturelles, mais, bien plutôt, à retablir les choses dans leur ordre et leur santé.” She offers a concise theory of the Grail, according to which this holy relic “atteste toujours la même correspondance entre le monde visible et l’invisible, dont les choses terrestres reçoivent leur forme stable et leur intangible légalité.” By tradition then, the Grail, like literature in its most conventional forms, is a source of meaning, truth, and stability; however, when the Grail is lost or forgotten, “la terre se gâte, le monde tombe malade, le temps lui-même se détraque jusqu’au moment où le champion du Graal restitue à l’objet perdu sa vigueur communicative et son pouvoir vital.” Robert embeds in this reading

27 Ibid., 212.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 212-13.
30 Ibid., 213.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
of the Grail legend the notion of the modernist writers’ alienation from modernized society. Their world is already bereft of meaning and felt to be a wasteland, hence the desperate need for the Grail to restore the land to its former plenitude.

Robert demonstrates how these modernist characteristics are the fundamental laws upon which Kafka constructs his universe, and they are most explicitly seen in K.’s tortured efforts to arrive at the Castle. Robert’s manner of describing K.’s Grail quest is consistent with her other formulations regarding The Castle as well as Kafka’s other writing. The Grail quest, in The Castle, can be stated in the following manner: Yes, in K.’s story man is in desperate need of the rejuvenating powers of the Grail, but

Sa bonne volonté ne sert de rien, car il n’y a plus nulle part d’objet symbolique, appelé Graal ou de tout autre nom, représentant pour tous les hommes d’un même âge et d’une même culture un but, ou à défaut, une direction. Aujourd’hui, la perte du Graal n’est plus celle d’un objet précieux retiré du monde ou dérobé provisoirement à la connaissance des hommes, elle signifie le dépérissement des symboles eux-mêmes qui, en un temps où l’ordre et le désordre, la santé et la maladie, l’erreur et la vérité ne s’opposent plus, mais se confondent et échangent sans cesse leurs propriétés, n’entretiennent que des superstitions plus ou moins grossières ou des souvenirs livresques à demi éteints. K. doit donc nécessairement échouer.33

The decline of the symbol, in addition to being an important modernist theme, can also be seen as one of the objectives of Robbe-Grillet’s writing: conventions are not to be trusted, perspective and point of view become a sort of playground, and subjectivity is both neutralized and radicalized.

**Holy Grail or Empty Vessel?**

Robert’s discussion of the symbolic emptiness of Kafka’s work reminds us of her similar statements regarding Kafka and the sign systems of literature, but it also points to

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another critic of overtly symbolic literature, Robbe-Grillet himself. In fact, Robert’s formulation of the Land Surveyor’s universe is strikingly similar to Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier’s wandering existence, void as it is of meaning and absent of any definitive truth. In *Dans le labyrinthe*, a Soldier struggles to return the box to his fallen comrades’ family but remains lost in a similar fashion to K.’s hopeless efforts within the castle’s bureaucracy. This last observation highlights Robert’s claim that the land is in need of a hero to restore a certain communicative force. If the Grail can have a restorative power to a given land, then, by analogy, literature is like this sacred object, restorative in its power to convey meaning and purpose.

The disintegration of symbolic meaning and the undecideability of truth are the lynchpins connecting Kafka, Robert, and Robbe-Grillet and in this instance, it is the Holy Grail that provides an object upon which to project the similarities of their themes. Roch Smith echoes Robert in referring back to the lack of “communicative force” in *Dans le labyrinthe*, which “brings to light a truth about fiction generally, namely that all fiction is in the final analysis undecideable” and any attempt to find meaning and insert a definitive explanation, like K’s quest, is “an effort doomed to frustration.” Bruce Morissette suggests that the Soldier’s box is not dissimilar to the “Cup and lance of Chretien de Troye’s legend of the Grail,” and, Smith, though making no reference to the Grail or the epic tradition, completes the analogy by announcing that “the Soldier’s box, so

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34 This interpretation is briefly noted in Smith’s study on *Dans le labyrinthe*.
carefully maintained throughout the novel, turns out to contain nothing noteworthy.”  

He goes on to explain the importance of this discovery: “Its apparent importance and final inconsequentiality serve to subvert the notion of content. There is neither a story nor a meaning to be found in the box.”  

Smith’s conclusion echoes the writing of Robert regarding K.’s ordeal but the question still remains as to what extent Dans le labyrinthe can be read as being a partial or inexact rewriting of the Perceval tale.

In the story that is recounted in Dans le labyrinthe, a Soldier is carrying a box whose contents are guarded as a secret until the final pages of the book. His job is to return this box to the family of his now deceased comrade at arms. This simple récit is complicated by the fact that he does not know where he is going or how to get there. It is important to note just how much the city’s snowy, dark streets resemble the world without a Grail, where “la terre se gâte, le monde tombe malade, le temps lui-même se détraque,” which of course reflects Robbe-Grillet’s disjointed chronology. What is more, the reader may conclude, just as when one read The Castle, that the Soldier, like the Land Surveyor, is the man who will put an end “aux enchantements de la neige et de l’hiver perpétuels et [ramener] la lumière dans ce pays de ténèbres.”

From a strictly superficial standpoint, Dans le labyrinthe has a number of striking similarities to Robert’s description of the Perceval legend as used as a critical approach to The Castle. Just like K., the Soldier “renonce à l’attirail épique.” The only indication of

37 Smith, 59.
38 Ibid., 95.
39 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 213.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 210.
his warrior’s outfit is the fact that “l’homme est vêtu d’une capote militaire,” otherwise he is a man of the modern era. Still he resembles K., who in his turn resembles knights of the Holy Grail as they themselves “se caractérisent par l’intrépidité, une résolution inébranlable, le renoncement, la capacité de risque sans arrière-pensées pour atteindre leur but.” Robert concludes that K. is second-to-none in this capacity, though it must be admitted that the Soldier possesses the same resolve—for in spite of his unfamiliarity with the town, the mistrust with which he is greeted by the townsfolk, his gunshot wound, and his illness (a delirious fever which overtakes him while sleeping in the barracks) he never once abandons his unique mission.

If the Soldier bears a certain resemblance to the Grail hero, his tale and his mission also bear further resemblance to the Grail quest itself. However, it is an inverted Grail quest where the journey and the story are folded onto themselves to become refracted, and contradictory. Just as in Kafka’s “retelling” of the Grail adventure, the role of interrogation and questioning is central to Dans le Labyrinthe. Whereas Perceval fails by not asking a question at the proper moment and K. fails to reach the Castle Perilous because of his utter lack of discretion—he fairly badgers the villagers with impudent questions and insolence—we see a third option open before us, that of the Soldier. Throughout the Soldier’s peregrinations, he never asks any questions at all—like the original Perceval story. Reversing K.’s experience, he is bombarded with questions, and it is his curse never to be able to answer them in a satisfactory manner.

43 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 211.
Many of the questions are conspicuous for their banality, but what is even more notable is the Soldier’s difficulty in providing useful information. He is asked: “Vous n’avez pas froid?” to which he confusedly answers, “Non … Oui … Un peu.”\footnote{Robbe-Grillet, 
_Dans le labyrinthe_, 132.} When asked where he will sleep for the night “il répond d’un signe vague.”\footnote{Ibid., 107.} He is at times asked about his quest: “Qu’est-ce que vous cherchez?” to which he ventures an explanation, “Je cherche une rue…une rue où il fallait que j’aille,” but the certainty of his quest wavers because he admits that, “C’est son nom que je ne me rapelle pas.”\footnote{Ibid., 57.} He then offers several possible names but can’t be sure of any of them.

Curiously, the Soldier is asked almost the exact same questions that Perceval should have posed when he reached the Castle—about the sacred object or about the ill king in one of the rooms. The Soldier is asked specifically, “Et dans ta boîte, qu’est-ce que tu as?”\footnote{Ibid., 240.} He is asked several times about his health: “Vous êtes blessé?” and “il fait, de la tête, un signe de dénégation.” He is asked if he is sick, answering: “Non plus, seulement fatigué.”\footnote{Ibid., 99.} Later, his child companion wants to know “Tu vas mourir?” but “le soldat ne connaît pas non plus la réponse à cette question-là.”\footnote{Ibid., 197.} To seemingly every inquiry the soldier answers “Je ne sais pas.”\footnote{Ibid., 143, 197, 206, 209, et cetera.} Even when a woman becomes more curious, and queries “vous cherchez quelqu’un, c’était pour la lui remettre?,”” he can only answer, “—Pas forcément, à lui, ou à un autre, qu’il m’aurait indiqué.”\footnote{Ibid., 207.}
woman presses him, and utters one of the specific Grail questions “Mais que contient-elle donc?”\footnote{Ibid.} but she never receives a satisfying answer.

The Soldier has always been in possession of the holy object of his quest but he is simultaneously injured and suffering from an illness. In what amounts to a quizzical *mise-en-abîme*, the Soldier becomes both the ill and injured Fisher King as well as the knight errant, Perceval. This collapsing of the story, the way in which all the elements are combined into a single entity, locates the tale in an interior space, which is to say bundled within a single subjectivity, that of the Soldier. This collapsing of roles into one figure complicates the novel’s relationship to the Grail precedent. The very interiority of the narrative space is once more relatable to Robert’s suggestion that the quest is “une épreuve tout intérieure,”\footnote{Robert, *L’Ancien et le nouveau*, 210.} but, the the subjectivity of the Soldier is further complicated by the framing of Robbe-Grillet’s story—is the Soldier merely a fictive element and not real at all? Does this not push the interiority of the ordeal from the space of character into the space of fiction? The familiarity of the Grail structure taken in tandem with the defamiliarization of its constituent elements places not only the novel but the criticism of the novel into a new relationship between form and content, tradition and modernity, the old and the new. Robbe-Grillet is in many ways taking advantage of the literary tradition that is already present in his tale, but he is also complicating the very nature of this tradition and the rules of the game.

At the same time, however, there remains a troubling wild card in *Dans le labyrinthe*, which is Robbe-Grillet’s style of geometric descriptions, repetition, and
ruptured chronology. As the novel concludes, the reader learns that the preceding narration has been the work of an author sitting in the room described in the first scenes. Though the content of the story bears many similarities to the Grail quest and the epic tradition, Robbe-Grillet’s style is problematic in its own right. It is circuitous and full of false starts, dead ends, and surprises for the reader. In *Dans le labyrinthe*, there is no definitive chronology and there is less unity of character and narration in the Soldier’s tale. The reader is prey to the fictional writer’s challenges and changes of mind as the latter composes his *récit*. The changes that Robbe-Grillet has made to the conventionality of the novel echo through all strata of this tale. Character, plot, and chronology, all the requirements of narration, description, and unity, all the elements of the novel, are challenged. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Robbe-Grillet’s focused attempts to void his fictive universe of allegory and symbolism.

Whereas K.’s village is dominated by a Castle and he knows where he is and vaguely where he is going, the Soldier is afforded no such luxury. Like K., he is wandering a city covered in snow and filled with mistrust, but the Soldier has no Castle dominating his horizon and providing a possible allegorical point of reference, a textual and geographical anchor. Unlike K., the Soldier has a more clearly defined task—to return the box to his dead comrade’s family. K.’s task is to establish contact with Count West-West and to assume his position as Land Surveyor, but he has no idea how to complete this task. The Soldier’s quest is perhaps more simplified and success would be easier to gauge, but his unfamiliarity with the town, and his having forgotten the name of the street and family that he is looking for send his mission spiraling toward the absurd.
The absurdity of this lack seems to indicate a clever twist of the Grail legend, where the knight errant is now in possession of the Grail and instead of seeking the Sacred object, his quest is to get rid of it. The Grail, or the Soldier’s box, as an objet troublant, has a long literary tradition, from Pandora’s Box to the Golden Fleece to the Maltese Falcon. But one can also consider the mystifying “MacGuffin” of a Hitchcock film in this category—an object that could be anything but whose sole purpose is to push along the narrative. Of course, Robbe-Grillet is aware of this literary tradition and takes special care to deprive the Soldier’s box of any possible allegoric or symbolic meaning. He achieves this quite simply by offering an inventory of the box’s contents: “Des letters ordinaires,” an old watch with a chain, a ring, “une chevalière en argent ou en alliège de nickel,” a bayonet handle. The box, after 200 pages of conjecture, is only an ordinary “boîte à biscuits,” and it belonged to a deceased Soldier named Henri Martin, a name that reveals as little about the man as would mere initials.

Morissette suggests that the contents of the box are provided to interrupt any possible search for meaning in the box. The very banality of the contents of Robbe-Grillet’s Grail-box should necessarily force us to return to Robert’s conclusion regarding K.’s quest: “Il n’y a plus nulle part d’objet symbolique appelé Graal ou de tout autre nom … elle signifie le dépérissement des symboles eux-mêmes.” The Soldier, for the entirety of the novel, is in possession of a vessel which is essentially empty; his quest is an inverted Grail Quest, an arduous journey through the night and the snow with no end

54 Robbe-Grillet, _Dans le labyrinthe_, 214.
55 Ibid., 215.
56 Morissette, 181.
and no reward. We can conclude, as Smith notes, that the “final inconsequentiality” of the box “serves to subvert the notion of content,”58 which suggests the void of transcendental meaning and absence of ultimate truth to be found in fiction. The Grail _qua_ fiction is emptied of its rejuvenative powers; it is no longer the site of decisive truth, unified characters, reliable chronology, spiritual redemption, or moral certitude. Truth and error become mixed and indistinguishable, symbolism is an empty vessel, reality is not to be found in fiction, not even as a pale reflection, or in the words of Smith, “It is as if the mirror has been turned inward to reflect the story of telling while presenting a dulled surface to external reality.”59 The quest is arduous and ultimately pointless. The very object that one is seeking contains neither magical powers, meaning, nor salvation. Yet, whereas there is no magic or salvation, there is all the depth and richness of the literary world and the critical process.

**Leaving the Labyrinth, Entering the Boardinghouse**

This striking attribute of modernist literature, which works to undermine transcendental notions of truth and salvation, is likewise a characteristic Maurice Blanchot’s _Aminadab_, a text equally reminiscent of Kafka. In Blanchot’s second novel, a lone traveler enters a boarding house seeking to talk to a woman who he believes beckoned him to enter. We notice three ways in which _Aminadab_ overlaps thematically with Kafka’s fiction: 1) The description and function of internal and external space; 2) the aesthetics of painting and portraiture; and 3) the radicalization of character naming.

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58 Smith, 59
59 Smith, 60.
In *The Castle*, we notice that while there are both interior and exterior scenes, a remarkable consistency unites them. The exterior scenes take place in the street, covered in snow and with the background of uninviting facades, which only reinforce K.’s sentiments of alienation. The interior scenes are set in inns, bars, bedrooms, corridors, or a schoolroom. The domesticity of the interior scenes contrasts with the barren coldness of the external scenes, but nowhere can K. find refuge or feel welcome. In each subsequent interior space—from the inn, to the Barnabas and Brunswick domiciles, to the school, and finally to Gerlacker’s room—K. is seeking sleep but he never finds it, and it would appear that fatigue is his only constant companion.

We observe a similar arrangement of internal and external spaces in *Dans le labyrinthe*. The Soldier wanders the labyrinthine streets, which are also covered in snow. The streets all look identical and are laid out in a grid-work pattern whose only distinguishing characteristics are the lampposts spaced at regular intervals. There are also doorways but they are all firmly closed and uninviting. The interior spaces to which the Soldier has access are analogous to those that K. visits. They are a café, a family’s kitchen, and the barracks. As in *The Castle*, the spaces in *Dans le labyrinthe* are a curious mixture of public and private, domestic and civil. Robert observed that in *The Castle* the streets and buildings are all anonymous and impenetrable, which may represent a society that is “fortement hiérarchisée,” an observation which we find reflected in *Dans le labyrinthe*. K., like the Soldier, “n’ayant pas de connaissance par le dedans, il s’attache d’autant plus aux dehors … Puisqu’il n’est pas initié à la vie, il va tenter de lui arracher

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60 This is true of *Le Voyeur* as well; Ingrid Hoestery examines the common architectural and spatial elements in *The Castle* and *Dans le labyrinthe*, analyzing the use of fantastic space and stairways.  
61 Robert, *L’Ancien et le nouveau*, 188.
son secret en interrogant ce qu’elle a de plus extérieur,” which may account for the uninviting, cold anonymity of the streets and buildings. The interiors best be described as vestibulaire, a word Poulet uses to refer to the boarding house in Aminadab. These spaces are crowded, filled with illogical passageways and Escher-like depiction of stairs and corridors which lend to these novels the allure of the fantastic.

Though interior spaces (rooms, hallways, barracks, infirmaries, and bedrooms) are places usually reserved for familial intimacy, in these novels, these spaces are transformed into a fruitless quest for sleep, respite, or quite simply, human contact. The exterior spaces (streets, courtyards, intersections, bridges, etc.) are foreign, hostile, and anonymously lacking in landmarks of any kind. Nature itself is completely absent; anything living is replaced with claustrophobic structures and cold, rigid constructions. Aminadab follows this general scheme though not without its own particularities.

The novel’s hero, identified only as Thomas, begins his peregrinations in the street. Whereas a pervasive snow creates a chilling environment in Dans le labyrinthe and The Castle, the weather in Aminadab is pleasant. Thomas even peers into a boutique which is open and inviting. Still in the street, he looks up at a building and notices a hand signal. Consumed by curiosity, he crosses the street and enters the building. He only perceives the gesture in the first place because a shadow passed in front of the window and permitted him to see inside. The semi-permeable nature of this structure is, as the

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62 Ibid., 261.
64 We notice an interesting shift in the use of interior and exterior spaces. Though Aminadab begins with Thomas walking along a brightly lit, sunny street, the entirety of the novel, after its circumspect opening paragraphs, takes place uniquely within the gloomy rooms of an architecturally implausible boarding house. It is true that Aminadab has a single, unified setting, but it manages to achieve and reflect the same architectural and spatial effects that we witness in Dans le labyrinthe and The Castle.
reader soon discovers, its power; it allows any to enter but once within its walls, it proves impossible, for Thomas at least, to ever leave again. Whereas The Castle and Dans le labyrinthe have almost an equal representation of interior and exterior scenes, Aminadab quickly centers the locus of its action inside a single house.

Once Thomas enters the building, the same claustrophobic spaces and vestibular architectural designs appear that were encountered in the other novels. The house is described as having “toujours les mêmes corridors, les mêmes vestibules, seulement plus larges et plus clairs, on eût dit que la maison cherchait la liberté et l’insouciance par ces voies qui ne menaient nulle part et qui pourtant faisaient partie d’un plan rigoureux.”

The house is impossible to navigate both spatially and narratologically, and Thomas struggles to understand the features therein. At one point, he is staring intently at a staircase that leads upward, as this is the direction in which he yearns to proceed, but a member of the staff informs him that immediately behind the first staircase is a second one, and Thomas is nonplussed by his failure to see this second fixture.

Like the heroes of The Castle and Dans le labyrinthe, Thomas is plagued by an insurmountable fatigue and is constantly looking for a place to rest, a glass of water, or a definitive explanation of the rules—or perhaps just a friendly word. From room to room, he wanders aimlessly and seeks an explanation of the characteristics of the house, but he is given little helpful counsel. His ignorance and confusion are only amplified by the darkness of the rooms, and this is itself amplified by a mise-en-abîme of interiority and exteriority in. In The Castle, for instance, when K. wanders the streets and enters houses and cafes, he finds only darkness and confusion; in Aminadab, the hallways act as

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surrogate streets, and it is the interior rooms that serve as private dwellings, hospitals, cafés, or, barracks. Thomas finds the darkness peaceful, but his calmness does not last as he quickly learns that his assumptions and conclusions about the building are erroneous.

We can conclude, from our reading of these three novels, that the architectural spaces are neutral, in the way that Robert—and not Blanchot—uses the term. Robert writes that “En vertu de l’impartialité et de la passivité qui caractérisent ses fonctions, le Château ne prend pas parti dans le conflit.” The same logic applies to Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier; the city that he wanders is neutral in regards to his quest. In Aminadab, the house, though characters refer to it as a synecdoche, is impartial and neither complicates nor aids Thomas. With no will to do harm or aid the protagonist, these architectural marvels are merely closed, impassable spaces: a series of huts, alleys, and high walls in The Castle; a grid of streets, identical facades, and street lamps in Dans le labyrinthe; and an enclosed honeycomb of darkened rooms and twisting hallways in Aminadab.

The paintings and visual arts represented in these novels are no less claustrophobic than the spaces in which they are found. The role of paintings cannot be undervalued when examining Dans le labyrinthe, Aminadab, and The Castle. Robert decodes what painting, and specifically portraiture, may signify in Kafka’s fictional universe, especially in regard to illusion, to the values of pictorial representation, and Deleuze and Guattari famously used paintings as their entrance into Kafka’s rhizome of writing. Dans le labyrinthe is no different in that the object of the painting becomes the center of attention throughout the narrative. The Je-narrator, an author in a secluded room, gazes at and finally animates the painting, and from this description, the café scene

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66 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 304.
comes to life and the rest of the Soldier’s wanderings begin to appear more coherent. Likewise in *Aminadab*, once Thomas penetrates the rooming house’s interior he cannot help but to examine and be captivated by the many paintings on the walls.

The surface quality of paintings echoes the external façade of the architectural constructions. Robert argues that when a Kafka character looks at paintings and portraits, “*Toutes les images qu’on lui montre ont ce même caractère d’instantané indéchiffrable,*”\(^\text{67}\) and as a result, “*il n’a rien de sûr où poser son regard que K. s’accroche si désespérément à l’extérieur des choses et des gens. N’ayant pas de connaissance par le dedans, il s’attache d’autant plus aux dehors, supposant entre les deux sinon une identité du moins d’instructive analogies.*”\(^\text{68}\) In a parallel movement, the reader’s eyes mimic the way in which the characters’ eyes are rejected from a deeper message to a reliance on the surface. Robert claims that this is a method to refuse a symbolic reading of the text, a procedure present in both Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot.

In their two novels, the reader encounters two forms of pictures: the still-life, such as the café scene in *Dans le labyrinthe* and the mimetic copies of rooms for let in *Aminadab*, and the portrait. In *Dans le labyrinthe* the portrait takes the form of a photograph on the wall of the family’s house where the Soldier briefly rests, which depicts a soldier either on leave or soon to join the army. In *Aminadab*, there are also portraits on the walls of the interior rooms and like Kafka’s portraits, they are dark, obscure, possibly palimpsests, and are impossible to recognize with any degree of detail.

\(^\text{67}\) Ibid., 255.
\(^\text{68}\) Ibid., 261 (author’s emphasis).
or to decipher with any degree of reliability. In contradistinction to *Dans le labyrinthe*, where the painting is the locus of action and of central narrative importance, in *Aminadab* the paintings function similarly to the way they do in Kafka, as curios and objects around which to construct a daydream. What is more, they also act as duplicating agents, in that they add a layer to an already constructed reality, such as the rooms which they realistically represent or even a character’s face, which serves as a second form of palimpsest. In a room that the hero enters in *Aminadab*, “Ces peintures, que Thomas aperçut à son tour avec surprise, étaient curieuses, elles représentaient d’une manière très exacte la salle.” Because of the exactitude of the representation in the picture, it is not clear if the text is referring to the room or the painting of a room, when Thomas “considéra avec une attention presque douloureuse la porte massive, en chêne solide, d’une épaisseur qui semblait défier toute atteinte, lourdement posée sur des gonds de fer.” Unlike the portraits in some of the rooms, the character referred to as Dom has a tattoo of a face superimposed on top of his own face, which not only serves to obscure his own visage, but also acts to separate and emphasize the real from the image, adding an important awareness of simulacra to the narrative.

Regarding duplicates and painting, Robert suggests that

> Le monde est plein de ces copies de la vie qui...ne sont jamais que de grossiers trompe-l’œil … K. … étant absent du monde, ne voit jamais le monde tel qu’il est sensé être dans sa nudité, mais des tableaux déjà composé sou des pages déjà écrites, un livre d’images où il n’est que trop

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69 Two such examples include: “c’était le portrait d’une jeune femme dont on ne voyait que la moitié du visage, car l’autre partie était presque effacée” (Aminadab, 36); ”Au murs étaient pendus des tableaux. Ils étaient peints avec tant de minutie qu’… il fallait s’en approcher de très près pour en distinguer non seulement les détails, mais l’ensemble” (Ibid., 19).
70 Jeff Fort includes this idea in his Introduction to *Aminadab*.
72 Ibid.
If paintings and architecture reveal the problematic nature of appearance and relying on surfaces, then the use of naming and nomenclature in these three novels only amplifies the complicated nature of the outward manifestations of things.

One is to resist attributing allegorical meanings based on inconclusive evidence. In these novels, the disorienting descriptions act to prevent the reader from confusing the surface value of things for some hidden truth, and nowhere is this disruption of the surface quality more apparent than in the acts of naming, where a thing, person, or place is reduced to a single sound or referent. These novelists present a nomenclature which is arbitrary, contradictory, incorrect, or entirely absent. In Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur*, for instance, the names Jacqueline and Violette are confused to such a degree that the reader is not sure if one or two girls exist. In *Aminadab*, characters are given arbitrary nicknames that they are not even aware they bear. In Kafka, Robert identifies a “naming sickness” in the work of Kafka. Every character is named in Kafka’s work, and these names reflect the heterogeneous nature of the fin de siècle Prague of the Austro-

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74 These three novelists are actively breaking with the conventions of the novel, as established in the nineteenth-century, in which the name of a character is not only stable, but provides the foundation for an entire identity. Robert, in referring to this tradition, remarks that literature, “sans participer elle-même à la lutte générale pour la vie … trouve dans son art des dénominations la plus sûre garantie de sa souveraineté : il lui suffit de perturber ou même de détruire le rapport de sens qui lie les choses au mots pour assurer sa suprématie sur tout ce qui, vivant ou inanimé, n’appartient pas au verbe inspiré.” (*Seul, comme Franz Kafka*, 188) The radicalization of naming in these novels is in fact the world of the novel overwhelming the reader’s expectations and experiences. Just as in the realm of narrative, we are wholly dependent on the character’s viewpoint, in this process of naming we cannot look to the extra-literary world for aid, but must instead wholly give ourselves to the literary world created within the book.
Hungarian Empire of which he was a resident. Blok, Klamm, Leni, Otta, Grubach, Titorelli, and Raban are typical of the names in Kafka’s fiction.

But one name is conspicuously lacking—the name of the protagonist in the later novels. As Kafka’s style matures, naming grows more austere. From Karl Rossman of *Amerika* to Joseph K. of *The Trial*, we arrive at K. in *The Castle*. Robert suggests that this naming sickness is a refraction or misappropriation of the tetragrammaton, the Jewish prohibition of knowing or pronouncing the name of God—only in Kafka’s case, as Robert suggests, the prohibition has been self-inflicted. Now the forbidden name is the name of the self, and it can only be signaled by a letter in the same way that the name of God is signaled by the unpronounceable [יהוה].

Robbe-Grillet’s use of names is different, yet clearly follows the same model. Since New Novelists aim to radicalize and rethink characters, naming plays a central role. Earlier in Robbe-Grillet’s career, characters were given names, but these names were not necessarily French in origin—Wallas of *Les Gommes* and Mathias of *Le Voyeur* are both conveniently disorienting but still successfully refer to the identity of a character. In *La Jalousie*, this tendency is diversified in three ways: by the foreign-seeming Franck, the abbreviated A—, and the unnamed husband/narrator. The unnamed character is taken to an extreme in *Dans le labyrinthe* where no character in the entire *récit* is named. The only name mentioned in the novel is Henri Martin but he never figures in the novel as an active character. He is the dead soldier whose package the Soldier is trying to deliver. He is constantly evoked but never present; when his name does appear, in the final pages of *Le Voyeur*, the name of the murdered girl is never known and a serves as a disruption in the naming of character.

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75 In *Le Voyeur*, the name of the murdered girl is never known and a serves as a disruption in the naming of character.
the novel; it is of absolutely no significance. It is as if naming the dead character, the
absent character that puts all the action into motion, were a reversal of the
tetragrammaton. The absent being is named and, in a way, desecrated, rendered banal.

The other name that dominates the novel is that of the dead soldier’s family. The
everseous gap in the Soldier’s ability to give the name is what gives the narrative its
momentum. In fact, the Soldier’s name aphasia extends to the names of streets. He
pronounces variations on the name Maladrier or Bouchard but is ultimately incapable of
producing a sound that is recognizable to the townsfolk. The Soldier’s own name remains
a mystery. His identity as a civilian with a family name is anonymous, but even more
surprisingly, as a soldier, his matriculation number, evoked twice, is inconsistent and
false. This is a radicalization of the trend that Kafka started in his novels.

In Aminadab, the problematics of naming are still more complicated. Thomas has
no family name. He appears on the scene with no history, no family, no profession, and
no description, neither a physical nor a psychological identity. Unlike K. who is called by
his profession—Land Surveyor—and the Soldier whose name is wholly reduced to his
profession, Thomas is never called by any other name, and exists in spite of having no
biographical attributes. At one point he learns to his horror that he is a member of the
service where he is a bourreau, but he is never referred to by this ghastly profession, and
his identity is not subsumed under his trade like Soldier or Land Surveyor.

In addition to Thomas, other named characters include Barbe, Dom, Lucie,
Jérôme and Joseph, as well as the eponymous and enigmatic figure Aminadab. Barbe and
Dom are noteworthy because they are names chosen at random—they are not so much nicknames as spontaneous vocal enunciations that signify a character who would otherwise be one more in a line of pronouns unanchored to anything resembling human experience. Some logic may govern the naming of Aminadab’s cast, but it may also be fanciful critical invention. Sartre, in his 1947 essay about Aminadab, suggests that the name Dom, which resembles the Russian word for house, could symbolize the mind/body split. Jérôme and Joseph seem like Biblical names and also recall The Trial’s Joseph K. or Jeremiah, one of K.’s assistants. Lastly we must account for the name of the novel and the name which is given to a character that never appears directly and is only hinted at in the elaborate mythology of the house: Aminadab.

Aminadab is a biblical figure of almost no importance. He was the father-in-law of Aaron, and the name appears in various genealogies. The name itself means “my people are generous” or “wandering people,” but it also figures in Blanchot’s personal life: the youngest brother of his lifelong friend Emmanuel Levinas bore that name. In the novel, Aminadab is a gatekeeper, a guardian to the lower passages, the locale that Thomas later learns he should have been seeking all along. Though Thomas never interacts with him and is not even convinced of his existence, Aminadab comes to represent the end of the quest, and as such, he also emphasizes simultaneously Thomas’ constant error and his hellish mission. Even the name is complicated because when he is

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76 Several examples can be shown to illustrate this point, for instance, “Thomas remarqua qu’elle connaissait le nom du jeune homme. — Nous nous sommes donnés les noms, dit-elle, pendant que vous cherchiez si bien la serrure de la porte ; il m’appelle Barbe et je l’appelle Dom. (Aminadab, 62) Thomas reflects, “Peut-être eut-il été le moment de lui demander comment elle s’appelait vraiment, mais Thomas ne dit rien.” (Ibid., 62-63) ; “Barbe, si tu veux, dit l’employé. C’est un de ses noms” (ibid., 187); and Thomas reminds Barbe about Dom : “Dom – vous le rappelez-vous ? Ce surnom était de votre invention – Dom n’était pas employé” (ibid., 198).

77 Christophe Bident provides an etymological explanation of the name and Fort cites him extensively.
referred to in the text, he is only mentioned obliquely. The speaker refers to the door (or gate) first and then, still with the gate as the focal point, mentions how it is “gardée par un homme qu’ils appellent Aminadab.”

There is no guarantee that this is his name, it is just what they call him; what is worse, we are not even sure who they are. From bearing no name to having an arbitrary one, a strong tradition is present from Kafka to Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet. The conventions of literature are being tested and the very nature of the conveyance of meaning and the stability of a text are being challenged.

**Aminadab and the Critics**

Maurice Blanchot is not predominantly known for his fiction. It has always been his theory that has garnered him the most critical and academic attention. His novels and récits are abstract, oblique, even fragile constructions that hint at literary traditions more than they interact with them. Blanchot’s fiction, rightly or wrongly, is not studied as fiction, but rather as a theory of fiction. One does not speak of plot, characterization, or time and space but rather tends to use his fiction as a springboard into theory, as a means to an end, without studying it with a serious goal. His fiction, however, can stand on its own without constant recourse to his critical writings.

Blanchot’s novels are not popular fiction; they are as difficult to read as Beckett’s without any of the humor. He is often times compared to Bernanos, but even here he lacks the saving grace of the catholic writer. In fact, if Blanchot’s critics can agree on anything, it is that his entire corpus defies categorization. He is not a new novelist, not a

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79 We are perhaps reminded that K., unable to distinguish between his two assistants, decides to refer to them both as Arthur, a decision which only adds to K.’s plight.
surrealist, not an existentialist, and to complicate matters, toward the end of his career, it becomes increasing difficult to distinguish his novels and récits from his theoretical texts.

In her 1975 study of Blanchot’s fiction, Evelyn Londyn notes the scarcity of studies devoted to Blanchot’s narrative writings. Yet in her own long study, she hardly discusses Aminadab, devoting only two paragraphs to the text. If there is a paucity of writing on Blanchot’s fiction as a whole, there is an absolute dearth regarding Aminadab. While Sartre has devoted an essay to it, and several critics refer to it in passing, it is rare to find a sustained critical discussion of this enigmatic novel.80

Though the plot of Aminadab may be simple to recount, the significance is complex, nuanced, and defiant of summarization. Tricks and traps abound, as do incoherent myths, obscure logic, and narratological ambiguities. More than a metaphysical drama about a man trapped in a strange house, Aminadab is Blanchot putting into practice some of his ideas about the nature of literature, the capacity of literary language the law, the conversation, and, according to Kleinberg, the disaster. These themes will become cornerstones for his later theory and récits which he will continue to write until his death in 2003.

The story of Aminadab can be recounted in one sentence but that sentence hardly addresses the experience of the novel. A stranger, Thomas, arrives in a town and, thinking he has been invited into a building after observing a hand signal, he enters a boarding house from which he never exits. Many critics notice a strong resemblance to Kafka’s tales, especially in the description of the narrow passages, the rooms and

80 Not mentioned in Londyn’s study, several essays do engage with Aminadab, including Foucault’s La pensée du dehors, and Poulet’s chapter from La Conscience critique.
corridors, the dream-like and hallucinatory evocations, and the laws and events that challenge logic and comprehension. It does not take a lot of imagination to attribute to Thomas’ desperation to reach the highest point in the house an allegory of the search for God or for some higher truth, which are also some of the most clichéd readings of Kafka. Robert expresses an utter lack of patience with theological readings of Kafka; similarly we can say that such a reading of Aminadab seem hasty and reductive.

Thomas is a stranger in an unnamed town. He first looks into a boutique where he is greeted but refuses to step inside. Across the street, he thinks that he has noticed a woman motioning to him from a high window, and he interprets this vague sign as an invitation to enter. Once inside, he spends the balance of the novel trying to find this woman and ascertain the meaning of the gesture. Concurrently, unfathomable things happen to him, and though they are explained to him, he remains curiously unsurprised by these disconcerting events. Included among the strange phenomena are being shackled to a boarder; having the nature of the Laws of the house described to him at length; overhearing a row but being unable to find the culprits; being absolutely incapable of reading a mysterious script whose source is a lamp; falling gravely ill; learning that he has been employed as executioner of the house; etc. He meets a woman arbitrarily called Barbe who he believes is the one who signaled to him, but he learns that he is mistaken. Later, she does act as a guide through the house all the while still carrying out menial tasks since she is employed as a sort of janitor. In addition to Barbe, Thomas is introduced to many other staff members who attempt to explain the twisted (read

81 In the same vein, he visits a gallery that presents exact replicas of each room, each painting absolutely exact in its attention to detail, Thomas is even represented in one of them.
Kafkaesque) machinations of the house. There are authorities, servants, boarders, laws and law books, but nobody is able to explain in a concise or coherent manner the way in which the house is run or who is in charge. All the contradictory stories and counter-intuitive explanations begin to take on the quality of a myth.82

The endless conversations allow for a comparison to Kafka but the underlying structures are just as intriguing. There remains much debate and uncertainty as to when Blanchot first read Kafka and to what degree one can accept this book is “inspired” by Kafka. Sartre writes that Blanchot, by his own admission, had not read Kafka at the time of composing Aminadab, but Sartre later dismisses this claim as improbable. Sartre lists their similarities before reporting the (uncited) words of Blanchot:

Ce qui est plus clair encore, c’est la ressemblance extraordinaire de son livre avec les livres de Kafka. Même style minutieux et courtois, même politesse de cauchemar, même cérémonial compassé, saugrenu, mêmes quêtes vaines, puis qu’elles ne mènent à rien. Or M. Blanchot affirme qu’il n’avait rien lu de Kafka, lorsqu’il écrivait Aminadab.83

Londyn, for one, thinks that Sartre takes Blanchot at his word whereas Fort sees a more ironic posturing by Sartre in his reporting. Fort goes further, thinking that Blanchot is being coy by refusing to admit to having read Kafka at this time.

Though there is a critical debate over the precise moment when Blanchot was introduced to the work of Kafka, there is no debate about the similarity between their two novels. Sartre observes “l’extraordinaire ressemblance d’Aminadab et du Château;”84

82 “Myth is the term for everything which exists and subsists only on the basis of language” (Valéry, Paul, “On Myths and Mythology,” in Selected Writings of Paul Valéry, tr. Anthony Bower (New York: New Directions, 1964), 199.
83 Sartre, Jean-Paul, Critiques littéraires: (Situations, I), (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1947), 114.
84 Sartre, 118.
Londyn succinctly observes that “la maison évoque le Château de Kafka;”\(^{85}\) while Fort claims that Blanchot “openly and unabashedly apprenticed himself to Kafka,”\(^{86}\) and how it is apparent that he “more or less explicitly set out to write a novel under the guidance of an exemplary predecessor and, in his search for the unknown, to enter into the uncanny space in which the land surveyor had lost his way.”\(^{87}\) Londyn adds a note of reproach to her analysis of their congruous texts: “Sans doute dans la perspective de l’œuvre Kafkaesque [sic], le roman de Blanchot paraît-il conventionnel.”\(^{88}\) Walter Strauss expresses a slightly different perspective; instead of trying to solve the question, he sidesteps it by underlining “a kind of pre-elective affinity of Blanchot for Kafka,”\(^{89}\) and seeing in 1948’s *Le Très-Haut* more of a “possible direct debt to Kafka.”\(^{90}\) It is less important to this chapter to determine exactly when Blanchot first read Kafka than it is to establish how Kafka’s writing echo throughout Blanchot’s fiction. The parallels with Kafka’s fiction can be observed in two ways, the first incidental (on the level of content) and the second structural (or formal). An incidental manifestation occurs when we notice that a crushing bureaucracy obstructs the path of the protagonist or that piles of paper and bumbling assistants appear in both texts.\(^{91}\) Structural manifestations include the underlying forms of narration, character, and genre.

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\(^{86}\) Fort, Jeff, Introduction to *Aminadab* by Maurice Blanchot, tr. Jeff Fort (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2002) XI.

\(^{87}\) Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Ibid, 180.


\(^{90}\) Ibid, 29.

\(^{91}\) In *The Castle*, when K. visits the Superintendent, the latter’s wife looks for an ancient memo regarding K. Mizzi, “opened the cabinet at once. K. and the superintendent looked on. The cabinet was crammed full of papers. When it was opened two large packages of papers rolled out…the woman sprang back in alarm” (Kafka, *The Castle*, 61). This debacle continues unabated for several pages, only now the Assistants get
Whereas Sartre and Londyn connect Kafka to the fantastic elements in *Aminadab*, Fort and Hess illustrate how *Aminadab* can be compared to *The Castle*. Fort notices how the laws and commentary remain “inscrutable and arbitrary,”92 and how, like *The Castle*, it is “a novel of wandering and speech, endless error and passionate commentary.”93 An example of the ways in which *Aminadab* echoes Kafka can be seen in this passage where Thomas tries to explain his standing. “Ma situation … n’a pas encore été officiellement définie. Être locataire, cela ne me paraîtrait pas un mal, mais serais-je agréé? Pourrais-je remplir les conditions? Aurais-je des garanties? Je suis arrivé il n’y a que peu de temps et j’en ai vu assez pour craindre de m’engager à la légère.”94 Anecdotally, this passage could have been lifted from *The Castle*, where K.’s uncertainty of his official status in a new place is followed by a series of inward looking and self-doubting questions that cannot be answered in any satisfactory way.

**From Allegory to Error and Illusion**

From these (albeit superficial) incidental comparisons to Kafka, we can examine some of the critical conclusions regarding *Aminadab*. Hess, for one, sees the novel as an epistemological quest: “Thomas’s quest represents the contemporary epistemological and linguistic search for meaning…Institutions representing social order are associated with

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92 Fort, XIII.
93 Ibid. XVII.
error, injustice, wrongdoing, and evil. Characters in Aminadab try to discover truth, yet make errors at every turn.”95 This failed quest recalls Robert’s idea of K. in The Castle, namely that he is doomed to wander in constant error. Hess continues, “Thomas first assumes there are answers to questions; at the end he learns there are none. Because truth does not follow a correspondence theory, questions and answers are unrelated.”96 In short, this vague story only compounds the troubles of a character who seeks answers to a question that he has not properly formed.

A more common critical reading comes from Fort and Sartre, which is to see in Aminadab a larger allegory. For Fort, it is an allegory of nothingness while Sartre reads Thomas’ quest as a search for grace, similarly to a common critical approach to The Castle according to which the Castle represents God, salvation, or the hereafter. Sartre declares, “Remplacez … le mot de « personnel » par celui de « Dieu », mot de « service » par celui de « providence », vous aurez un exposé parfaitement intelligible d’un certain aspect du sentiment religieux.”97 If we follow Robert’s understanding of Kafka and all the myriad definitions and critical translations of his work, we would not be very satisfied with the “meanings” offered by this strand of criticism. As Robert writes,

Les plus grands écrivains, les critiques les plus avertis de notre époque ont écrit sur Kafka et médité son œuvre, et s’ils sont tombés parfois dans ce piège de « significations » qu’on tente maintenant fort justement de désamorcer, ils y étaient poussés par Kafka lui-même qui, en dernière analyse, propose au lecteur moins un roman que le compte rendu d’une longue recherche. Comment le besoin de savoir ne serait-il pas stimulé par une œuvre où tout est question interrogatoire, expérience ; où l’action, en

95 Hess, Deborah M, Complexity in Maurice Blanchot’s Fiction: Relations Between Science and Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 203.
96 Ibid., 205.
97 Sartre, 131.
somme, se réduit à l’examen systématique d’opinions, de solutions ou de vérités possibles ?

The search for meanings, according to which one simply replaces one concept for another, is futile, though there is still a valuable lesson to be learned, namely that in the search for possible truth, mistakes will be made, and one must constantly be wary of illusions. Robert warns that the main character’s “optique est faussée par ces illusions dont la correction requiert une attention épuisante, sans donner jamais de résultat definitive.” Just as this observation serves as an incidental link between K. and Thomas, it also serves as an allegory for the reader. In the end it is the text, Robert intuits, that provides the illusion to the reader and we, too, must be vigilant.

The notion of error and illusion is only reinforced by the text of Aminadab itself. Thomas is reproached continually by the staff of the house and called aveugle, he is told everything is trompe l’œil and illusion, and he is warned that his “yeux ne sont pas encore habitués à regarder.” When not being warned against illusions, he is being reproached by the staff, reminded of his ignorance, or that he does not belong. When Thomas wants to believe the surface reality which appears before him, he is mistaken: “Pure apparance !” barks a man, as if to teach Thomas an important lesson. He continues, “Vous ignorez beaucoup de choses … Comment pourriez-vous prendre part à des discussions auxquelles seuls les plus anciens d’entre nous peuvent s’intéresser?”

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98 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 195.  
99 Ibid., 260.  
100 A-t-on jamais vu quelqu’un d’aussi aveugle ? Que devrais-je donc vous dire pour que vous cessiez de déformer la vérité ? (Blanchot, Aminadab, 218)  
101 Blanchot, Aminadab, 254.  
102 Ibid., 95.  
103 Ibid., 88.  
104 Ibid., 89
The word illusion itself is encountered frequently in the text, as Thomas is told: “Vous vous perdez dans des illusions,”\textsuperscript{105} and also “Non, vous avez été victime d’une illusion ; vous avez cru qu’on vous appelait mais personne n’était là et l’appel venait de vous.”\textsuperscript{106}

From these illusions it is only natural that Thomas draws the wrong conclusion, but he is reprimanded for this error as well. Foolish when he thinks he is being clever, Thomas is berated by Barbe because he ‘tire donc de [sa] remarque deux conclusions.’ Barbe responds, “Je n’ai rien dit de semblable,” and she wants to know, sardonically, “comment pouvez-vous interpréter ainsi mes paroles?”\textsuperscript{107} She adds this last remark as one more in a long line of reproaches. Jérôme et Joseph are quite blunt when they tell Thomas that “vous êtes ignorant des choses d’ici et vous avez tendance à juger sévèrement ce que vous voyez. Tous les débutants sont ainsi … Nous avons coutume de dire que les locataires sont d’éternels vagabonds qui ignorent même leur chemin.”\textsuperscript{108} A last reproach sums up all the others:

Même si vous n’avez pas la sottise de croire que vous touchez au but, vous pensez que du moins le but s’est rapproché. Que de chemin parcouru, murmurez-vous en vous-même, depuis que je l’ai rencontrée au sous-sol! Erreur, tragique erreur … Comment attacher plus d’importance aux apparences qu’à la volonté imprescriptible de ceux dont vous dépendez?\textsuperscript{109}

It becomes apparent that Thomas’ tragic error is the belief not only that his goal is attainable, but the even more fundamental error of believing that a goal exists.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 211. 
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 225. 
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 199. 
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 106-07. 
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 206-07.
From the architectural and painting problematic of illusion and external surface, Robert helps us conclude that these constant states of error and illusion are, in fact, caused by Thomas’ not belonging to the society where he finds himself. Both K. and the Soldier are treated as outsiders in the respective towns that they visit but this status is most solidified in Aminadab. Thomas, a confused and bumbling outsider, is a fine example of one of the genres that Robert reads into The Castle: the comedy of errors.

Thomas is the first to acknowledge that he does not belong, when he flatly states, “Moi, je suis encore un étranger.” Thomas is an outsider and he uses this status to excuse his behavior and constant fault. But the occupants of the house do not accept this as an explanation for his wrongdoing, and physically stand apart from Thomas to emphasize their own unwillingness to be associated with him, they interject, “Ah ! dit l’homme en se séparant de Thomas, vous n’êtes pas d’ici.” One of them, patronizing Thomas, attempts to placate him: “avant de se jeter dans une partie de la foule, il prit la peine de se retourner pour dire nous en reparlerons lorsque vous ne serez plus étranger.” Of course, it is understood that he will never cease to be a stranger and lorsque only amplifies his status outside the society of the house.

Traditionally a nineteenth-century genre, the novel form of the comedy of manners never truly goes out of fashion because there are always confusing social situations to be navigated and awkward misfits who clash with the rigid laws of any given class or society. In a comedy of manners, an outsider comes to a new place and, constantly at odds with the given society, gradually either learns its customs or changes.

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110 Robert maintains that The Castle draws from the Comedy of Manners without ever belonging to it.
111 Blanchot, Aminadab, 82.
112 Ibid.
its folly through his own graces and learning. Relating the genre to the tradition of the Enlightenment, Robert describes another condition of the comedy of manners as the process of changing citizens ideas and spreading belief in progress; but this trait seems curiously absent in these modernist-leaning texts. In *The Trial*, Robert pursues, it is Joseph K.’s ignorance of the legal proceedings that provide the central conflict for a comedy of manners; no matter what objections he makes, the rigid, monolithic system of the Law does not budge.

In *Dans le labyrinthe*, it is the Soldier’s incapacity to navigate the city, remember the street name, to allay the town folk’s mistrust, or to answer their facile questions, that once more underlines the townsfolk’s imperviousness to change. In *The Castle*, as Robert writes, we notice that, “l’intrusion de K. au village provoque une hostilité presque générale. En sa qualité d’étranger, en effet, il est amené à rompre la loi du silence, à défier le conformisme des gens ordinaires, par définition plus épris de paix que de vérité.” If this is the condition of K., we find a parallel with the first part of this observation, and a reversal regarding the second. The people of the boardinghouse are committed to the truth, even if Thomas misunderstands it at every turn. It becomes a constant note in the novel as they are telling Thomas of his error (even folly) while he still continues forward, ignoring and insulting them in a sort of quixotic stubbornness and fidelity to his own conceptions of truth.

A last element of the comedy of manners, as Robert formulates it, recalls the myths that circulate around the workings of *The Castle*, the Law, and the boarding house. Gossip, talk, and language in general are the common characteristics that govern how

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each society is organized, but the protagonist in a comedy of manners, according to Robert, is “contraint de bavarder et de tourner en rond, il affronte continuellement les mêmes périls, les mêmes ennemis. Et grâce à ce « continuellement » qui le laisse à l’écart de toute action et lui interdit jusqu’aux plus minces succès, il entre de plein droit dans la légende.”

Legend, or myth, is formed by these incompatible speeches because, according at least to Valery’s definition of myth, “There is no speech so obscure, no gossip so fantastic, no remark so incoherent that we cannot give it meaning. One can always assume a meaning for the strangest language.” The creation of legend out of chaos, via language, is the very nature of myth. Valery invites us to “Suppose … that several accounts of the same event, or varying reports of the same incident are given in books or by witnesses, who … do not agree … Their disagreement gives birth to a chimera,” but “something that is destroyed by a little extra precision is a myth.”

However, it seems that both Kafka and Blanchot invert this theory. For the more precise the attempts at defining the machinations of The Castle bureaucracy or the workings of the house, the more confusing everything becomes. As these legends are contradictory, incoherent, and counter-intuitive, it is the task of the comedy of manners hero (qua anti-hero) to simultaneously not understand and stand in opposition to the outlandish customs. In the case of Kafka and Blanchot they must also fail in the end—Joseph K. is murdered whereas K. and Thomas continue on ad infinitum, as if pursuing a death in abeyance.

_Aminadab and Genre_

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114 Ibid., 231.
115 Valery, 99.
We have already identified some of the narrative techniques observed by Robert in Kafka and analyzed how they reappear as similar techniques in *Dans le labyrinthe*, such as a neutral narrator, an overwhelming narrative consciousness, ambiguous chronology, and a certain simplicity of style. Robert describes the style in Kafka’s texts as free from metaphor which is his way of reserving judgment. In his fiction, Kafka explains; but he also manages to reserve judgment to such a point that he exhausts even the faculty to judge. Blanchot’s novel puts many of the same processes to work, and the reader’s judgment is, in the end, exhausted. The narrator never offers an opinion but such a quantity of opinions is offered that the reader could not possibly choose the correct assessment with any degree of surety. Blanchot’s novels are written in a straightforward manner; the prose is simple and direct, the vocabulary uncomplicated, and the style is free of metaphors, rhetorical flourishes, and hyperbolic poetic lyricism. Making us think of Robbe-Grillet’s preface to *Dans le labyrinthe*, the staff of the boarding house in *Aminadab* explains the meaning of the house and what all the objects inside it are worth: “mais vous n’y verriez rien de plus et rien de moins que ce qu’il y à voir, un appartement vide, désert, plus clair peut-être que les autres, couvert de poussière et inhabité.”

In addition to being devoid of metaphor, *Aminadab* also exhibits Szanto’s idea of narrative consciousness; the reader is allowed access to the text solely by way of Thomas’s consciousness. There is no narrative filter, no free indirect discourse, and no authorial interruptions. Sartre muses that “nous emboîtons le pas ; puisque nous sommes le héros, nous raisonnons avec lui ; mais ces discours n’aboutissent jamais, comme si la

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grandes affaires étaient seulement de raisonner.\textsuperscript{117} In relating this observation to the fantastic, he describes such writing as “un « Erziehungsroman » ; le lecteur partage les étonnements du héros et le suit de découverte en découverte. Seulement, du même coup, il voit le fantastique du dehors, comme un spectacle, comme si une raison en éveil contemplait paisiblement les images de nos rêves.”\textsuperscript{118}

From the reduced perspective, we can expect a reconstitution of the ordering and importance of chronology. Memory, fantasy, whimsy and erroneous perceptions, as experienced by the main character, disrupt the certainty of what the reader is encountering. Whereas \textit{Dans le labyrinthe} is purposely jangled and disordered in terms of the order of events, imaginings, and scenes which give the reader the feeling of reading episodes out of order, Robert notes that “le Château n’est pas si totalement décousu qu’on puisse le lire dans n’importe quelle ordre, mais, vu le caractère épisodique et relativement autonome de ses parties, il est certain qu’il ne gagnerait ni ne perdrait beaucoup à être lu dans un autre arrangement.”\textsuperscript{119} It seems that \textit{Aminadab} conforms much more to Robert’s conception of \textit{The Castle} than to Robbe-Grillet’s constructions in \textit{Dans le labyrinthe}. As one reads of Thomas’s travails, the book progresses from episode to episode and from scene to scene without the use of flashback, memories, or fantasy, but the episodes could essentially happen in any order. Thomas sees the gesture first and learns of his ultimate error last, but the events in between—conversations, entrances, and exits—could occur in any order, which adds one more layer to the narration as well as

\textsuperscript{117} Sartre, 125 (author’s emphasis).
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{119} Robert, \textit{L’Ancien et le nouveau}, 232.
one further way in which this novel, like Robbe-Grillet’s and Kafka’s, has broken from
conventions typically associate with the art of fiction.

The construction and use of characters, like narration, is complicated and even
radicalized in Blanchot’s novel. Characters in *Aminadab* are only hinted at; they are place
holders and sketches far removed from the literary traditions dictating that characters
should be mimetic representations of twentieth-century French society. They are defined
by their strained relationship to language, not only to the language that created them, but
also to the language that they use in attempting to express themselves by way of
interminable conversation. In this way, they clearly flow from the tradition created by
Kafka; the conversation is endless, confusing to the uninitiated, and, in the end, it only
obfuscates a potential message instead of conveying one. In Robbe-Grillet, on the other
hand, the process is much the opposite. Characters speak little or not at all. They seek
answers and information, just as they do in Blanchot and Kafka, but they are frustrated in
their communicative efforts. In *Dans le labyrinthe*, the answer is frequently, “Je ne sais
pas” or simply “non,” whereas in Blanchot and Kafka, the rampant verbosity masks the
characters’ inability to convey simple meanings. They speak at length, for pages and
pages, and though minute explanations are given of remote and nuanced affairs, the
confusing message could just as easily be enunciated: “Je ne sais pas,” for that is the sum
total of understanding on the part of the heroes, vis-à-vis the superstructure they are
endeavoring to comprehend.

We notice how, in both Sartre and Robert’s writing, discussions of character are
often used as a springboard to a discussion of the fantastic. In what amounts to a clear
inheritance from Kafka, Blanchot constructs origin-less characters that remain impassive to the improbable events that they witness. Sartre notices this trend, and, while referring to Kafka, he highlights how, in creating Thomas,

M. Blanchot a adopté le même procédé ... Nous ne savons d’où il vient, ni pourquoi il s’acharne à rejoindre cette femme qui lui a fait signe. Comme Kafka, comme Samsa, comme l’Arpenteur, Thomas ne s’étonne jamais : il se scandalise, comme si la succession des événements ... lui paraissait parfaitement naturelle mais blâmable, comme s’il possédait en lui une étrange norme du Bien et du Mal, dont M. Blanchot a soigneusement omis de nous faire part.120

The rootlessness and lack of origins of the main character are directly derived from Kafka’s K., who, according to Robert,

Entre dans le roman préalablement débarrassé de tout ce qui fait la réalité corporelle, mais aussi les limites de l’homme ordinaire : les caractéristiques physiques, l’entourage naturel, la famille, l’état civil. Dépayssé dans tous les sens du mot, dépossédé même de l’avoir des plus pauvres — car l’être le plus déshérité a encore un nom ... il est situé hors de tout lieu et de toute histoire, plus seul et dépouillé que le fut jamais aucune créature réelle ou fictive.121

The character of Thomas, in particular, is similar to both Kafka’s K. and Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier. The most important similarity is that Thomas has no discernable qualities. He is a cipher owning no physical description, no past, no memories, no surname, no family, and no characteristics save the power of speech, inquiry and observation—but these powers are rendered useless in the boardinghouse. To use one of Robert’s descriptions of Kafka’s characters, Thomas, too, is a man without qualities, a man of no election.

Lacking qualities, he is “Comme tout personnage de conte, il n’a pas d’identité ni d’origine définies, il vient « de loin », c’est tout ce qu’on sait, et se confond entièrement

120 Sartre, 124 (author’s emphasis). This last comment refers to the lack of judging by the narrator, an important similarity to Kafka and narrative consciousness.
121 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 222.
avec sa mission. La solitude fait partie de son rôle, mais il [ne] peut en sortir [qu’à] condition d’avoir mené à bien son aventure merveilleuse.”¹²² The characters from a tradition epic tale, alone and utterly absorbed in their mission, embark on a quest and many quests can be read into Aminadab. Among them the quest for knowledge a quest for love, a search for justice, or, what is still more likely, a quest for the quest itself, which is to say, to be given some mission. If we read The Castle as a surrogate Grail quest doomed to failure from its very incipit and Dans le labyrinthe as an inverted Grail quest where an empty, fraudulent, devalued Grail is returned to the Grail Castle (like an unwanted birthday gift) then we can see in Aminadab the searching for the quest itself, which could in fact be the quest for the belief in the quest. But in this fictive universe emptied of transcendent and a stable notion of truth, such belief in a quest, or something after which to quest, becomes, almost by definition, absent. All that remains is to wander and to be perpetually “en errance,” which is to be understood as both in error and errant.

The questing for a quest, the seeking of a mission, reveals Thomas to have no real quest at all. He seeks the meaning and origin of a hand signal which he believes invited him into the house, but it quickly becomes apparent that this motion, like his quest, is fraudulent. The reader and Thomas learn that the signal is erroneous and that he and the reader with him are always in error. Even when Thomas’ ambition is explained to him, it is dismissed as puerile:

Votre ambition, c’était de gagner les hauteurs, de passer d’une étage à l’autre, d’avancer centimètre par centimètre, comme si, à force de marcher, vous deviez nécessairement déboucher sur le toit et rejoindre la belle nature. Ambition puérile qui vous a tué simplement. Quelles

¹²² Ibid., 209.
privations n’avez-vous pas dû vous imposer! Quelles fatigues dans une atmosphère pestilentielle!

The utter futility of his ambition and goal reach their figurative end when Thomas, with fading strength, sees the reflection of sunlight and hence the beginning of a new day, then passes out, in utter abandon and, presumably, despair. It appears that for Thomas, like K., the only outcome of all his trials and exertions is to exhaust his strength and resources.

Fort sees in Thomas’ anti-adventure something that is “conventional and even in a way … very “classic”—the hero on a quest.” But Blanchot complicates the traditional quest in almost every way imaginable until it disintegrates. Though Blanchot takes on the classical forms of a Moby Dick, Odyssey, or Don Quixote, he continues the work that Robert discovers in The Castle, which is to say a quixotic imitation: where mockery and homage come together to create an uncanny combination of the old and the new whose final accomplishment is to lay bare the conventions of the novel, and, in the words of Fort, “undo it from the inside.”

While we found in Dans le labyrinthe an inversion of the grail legend and the Perceval tale, and in Aminadab a quest that could never even have begun for lack of a mission, critics linger on Aminadab and question the novel’s relationship to the fantastic. In describing Blanchot’s literary kinship to Kafka, Sartre and Londyn both label him a writer of the fantastic. Maurice Nadeau concisely states that “Dans Aminadab nous glissons dans un monde d’hallucination où le surnaturel semble être l’ordinaire.”

Sartre combines the word fantastic with the concepts of l’endroit et l’envers. He devises

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123 Blanchot, Aminadab, 269.
124 Fort, VII.
125 Ibid., X.
126 Nadeau, 191.
four combinations of these terms and decides that the rules for the fantastic are relatively fixed. When the laws of nature hold, it is a case of l’endroit, and when nature is imbued with supernatural powers (trees that can speak, magic potions, etc.), it is l’envers. The same two categories hold for a character inhabiting such a place. He believes that Kafka invented, or at least perfected, the “endroit” character in an “envers” environment—also termed absurd—and he claims that Blanchot was using the same tools or mimicking Kafka to create an “univers … à la fois fantastique et rigoureusement vrai.”

Sartre focuses on the role of messages; in Aminadab (which exemplifies l’envers), and explains how “Dans le monde « à l’endroit », un message suppose un expéditeur, un messager et un destinataire, il n’a qu’une valeur de moyen ; c’est son contenu qui est sa fin.” In the space of Aminadab, messages are confused and, as in Kafka’s fiction, they are often times without source or indecipherable. Sartre illustrates his observation with Kafka’s short stories The Emperor of China, and The Judgment. In a similar fashion, the original hand signal whose message Thomas never fully understands exhibits how messages are error-prone and incomprehensible in Aminadab, but reversed from the Kafka model. In Kafka’s texts, messages have no origin, the Emperor who made a decree has been dead for generations, but still the message needs to be delivered. From an absent sender in Kafka we arrive at a non-existent receiver and an utterly meaningless message in Blanchot. Thomas, still obstinately clinging to his hope to send a message to the upper stories of the house, is reproached for his misunderstandings: “Donc, pas d’enfantillages; votre messager aurait beau accepter votre message, l’apprendre par cœur et le porter là-

127 Sartre, 129
128 Ibid., 121
haut au péril de sa vie, il ne trouverait personne à qui le remettre.”

But even this explanation is rendered absurd because, as Thomas later learns, “l’échec du messager s’expliquait par l’insignifiance du message.”

Sartre, Londyn, and Nodier read into these illogical episodes proof of the fantastic, and there are, naturally, a number of examples and explanations. The “narrative consciousness” is one of these factors and Sartre himself discerns how a reduced point of view creates a feeling of nightmarish yet calm disorientation in the novel. Though the novel feels fantastic or creates an unpleasant, even absurd atmosphere, nothing supernatural actually happens. Things do not have a strong causal relationship, as Sartre remarks, which is why it is hard to explain just why Dom is shackled to Thomas. Yet, a lack of causal relationship does not necessarily make a text fantastic. The events of Aminadab, no matter how counter-intuitive, are possible and based within the realm of possibility. Critics reduce the complexity of Blanchot’s novel to a facile “fantastic” reading, and Robert attacks critics for doing the same to Kafka. We could easily confuse her description of The Castle with the aforementioned reading of Aminadab:

On explique généralement la sorte d’envoûtement propre à l’art de Kafka par la façon tout à fait inédite dont il allie le fantastique à l’observation scrupuleuse, méticuleuse, presque pédante des choses quotidiennes. Mais justement, il n’y a là aucun fantastique, la magie, le merveilleux, l’irruption Continue de forces irrationnelles ne font que transcrire avec la dernière précision des faits réels, décisifs, quoique masqués, dont tout homme peut observer sur lui les multiples effets.

Fort applies this idea to Aminadab and enlarges the critical possibilities of the novel:

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129 Blanchot, Aminadab, 219.
130 Ibid., 182.
131 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 270 (my emphasis).
If this is “fantastic,” it is nevertheless far from magical and is closer to a mere manipulation of words whose only effects are empty simulations…the “fantastic” here does not consist in the immediate realization of thoughts or a dreamlike alternate world but in the empty effects of nomination. In this sense, literary space is one in which the name in no way creates the thing but rather … the absence of the thing, its shimmering emptiness … here enchantment is disabled by the rigor of fiction itself, the recognition that this gesture—creating something by naming it—remains empty and leaves only the residue of the name. Here everything is possible, but nothing actually happens except a fictional speech in search of its own law and origin.”

But if we agree that Aminadab is not fantastic, then what is it? What gives it its unique character of seeming always to defy expectation, logic, and convention?

I suggest that what truly causes a disorienting or defamiliarizing feel to Aminadab is not the events that occur but rather the rhetorical devices that Blanchot uses to orchestrate events and supply an atmosphere of dislocation and frustration. Thus when Fort argues that “the suspension of disbelief required by the fantastic is not relevant here, because belief is never solicited,” we can dissect the suggestion that the belief is not being solicited by laying bare the rhetorical elements that Blanchot uses in his novel. The fantastic only happens by analogy. It is only as if truly incredible events arrive. In an early scene, Thomas encounters a guard who stands by mutely. Thomas gives him money and the guard’s demeanor changes slightly: “c’était comme si, le gardien n’ayant rien eu à garder jusqu’à présent, Thomas lui eût créé des devoirs nouveaux en achetant sa complaisance.” More than any other rhetorical construction in Aminadab, Blanchot has recourse to the analogical construction comme si, and we can trace a direct precedent and line of apprenticeship to Kafka’s fiction.

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132 Fort, XII.
133 Ibid., XIII.
134 Blanchot, Aminadab, 15.
The Rhetoric of *Comme si*

The clause *as if* can be organized into two categories. The first case of *as if* is used strictly as an analogy: “He stumbles around *as if* chased by a bat.” Like any analogy, it may be judged as weak or strong; the reader can agree with or refuse it as illogical or ill-fitting. Moreover, this usage of *as if* is followed by an implicit idea: “but is not.” The understanding of the utterance “he stumbles around *as if* he were chased by a bat” implicitly acknowledges that there is no bat. Let us look at an even more obvious example: “You boss me around *as if* you were my father.” The producer of such a phrase could only use *as if* with the full knowledge that the addressee *is not*, in fact, the father.

The following sentence illustrates a second use of *as if*: “He stumbles around *as if* he were drunk.” This utterance is more ambiguous; the reader does not know if the subject of this sentence is drunk, or just appears drunk. He could be stumbling for any number of reasons, but we do not know if he has consumed any alcohol. This second usage of *as if* reveals the limited point of view of the producer of the phrase. A limited consciousness creates a hypothetical allusion that can be guessed at but never known; it serves as an analogy but it could also prove to be true upon investigation.

In *Aminadab*, we encounter both instances of this expression, and they echo Kafka’s texts in both structure and use. We find one example at the novel’s beginning where the narrator, by way of an analogy, describes a painter and his clumsy technique: it is “Comme si l’homme qui travaillait là avait eu pour tâche, non pas de peindre, mais de corrompre ses instruments de travail et de créer autour de lui un décor inutile et
mauvais." We understand this immediately as an analogy; the man is not corrupting but painting. This example fits the first category where the words “but is not” could be added at the end. The second category is perhaps more common, an ambiguous analogy veiled by point of view as with the instance of two of Thomas’s interlocutors who “s’interrogèrent comme s’ils voulaient préparer une réponse en commun, mais ils gardèrent le silence.” Thomas and the reader are ignorant as to how these characters intended to respond.

Kafka’s texts in French are filled with the clause comme si, but because Kafka used the German expression als ob, it experienced an evolution in its path from German to French by way of translation, interpretation, and commentary. In a study of translators’ rendering of Kafka into French, Monique Moser-Verrey examines Kafka’s language and shows how it has been complicated and transmogrified in French criticism and literature. The German form of the term, als ob (“as if” or “as though”), is relatively clear in its meaning. It is distinct from wie (“as” or “like”), but it is moderately confused in French where both are rendered with comme si and comme. One need only turn to Moser-Verrey’s article, “Amerika ou le corps du disparu,” to see the problems and possible solutions proposed by French translators of Kafka’s Amerika. Moser-Verrey examines the problems of analogies for translators; beginning with “wie,” a word that she classes “parmi les éléments intraduisibles de la langue allemande.” It is therefore a word for which a plethora of translations exist. This wie (which is distinct from als ob) is still
rendered in to the French comme si. According to Moser-Verrey, this inexact translation (als ob and the English as if are followed by the subjunctive mood as opposed to the imperfect in French138) creates a passivity in the texts, a transformation which allows things to appear (apparaître) as opposed to being perceived (paraître). In Lortholary’s translation of Amerika, the use of certain verbs, such as paraître and sembler, signals an inexact allusion. To say that something seems like something else is to allow for the statement to be followed by the phrase “but is not” or for the positing of an analogous relationship without certainty,139 which in the end makes it approximative in meaning to the original als ob.

Moser-Verrey uses the example of light to show how this trend is apparent in Amerika, where “tout se passe pour [Karl Rossman] comme si l’éclairage s’intensifiait subitement.”140 Instead of focusing on the example of light, we could instead read that “tout se passe pour lui comme si,” which is to say that the entire novel is an analogy, that nothing really happens—this is an extreme reading, yet rhetorically plausible. Moser-Verrey offers an analysis that is conscious of the problematics of translation; she emphasizes the troubling analogous constructions (wie and als ob). At the same time, she does not offer any larger view as to the hermeneutical consequences of these constructions. Robert and Barthes, on the other hand, do.

Robert suggests that one must approach Kafka thinking in contradictions. One must simultaneously accept the premise, but recognize that there are also limitations: Yes,

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138 Moser -Verrey explains how French translators struggle with the verbal phrases that follow such constructions.
139 In this way, sembler and comme si are almost synonymous.
140 Moser-Verrey, 175.
there are events happening in Kafka’s fictional world, but they are happening in a modified way, an analogous way. The reader has no choice but to acknowledge as true what is happening, yet at the same time remain aware that (s)he has no access to the events other than through perspective of the Kafka character. We observe in this “yes … but” formulation a reflection of one of the uses of as if; it is a reduced point of view, an analogy from a restricted perspective. “Nous assistons aux événements par l’intermédiaire de son regard,” writes Robert, “et ce regard ne se pose pas sur [Karl], qui se connaît, mais sur les autres, sur l’autre qui ne lui renvoie qu’incidemment partiel et déformé, un reflet de sa propre image.”141 The narrative consciousness is not analyzing Joseph K.’s interior psychology, which is largely known to him already, instead it is struggling to describe the phenomena that it perceives, but does not understand. It is this partial and deformed understanding that can only be expressed through the rhetorical devices of analogies—comme si, and sembler.

In “La Réponse de Kafka,” (1960) Roland Barthes offers a reading of Robert’s Kafka criticism, where he, like Robert, complicates the translation problems posed by Moser-Verrey, and brings the discussion into a more abstract realm. The question of translating Kafka’s rhetoric raises the question about the meaning of Kafka’s rhetoric. Barthes writes, again alluding to Robert, that “le monde est une place toujours ouverte à la signification mais sans cesse déçue par elle,” and, as such, Kafka’s texts, “[auorisent] mille clefs également plausibles, c’est-a-dire qu’[ils] n’en [valident] aucune.”142 Because

142 Ibid. Barthes’ conclusion reminds us how Derrida, in his exegesis of Kafka’s parable “Before the Law,” calls the understanding of the law “inaccessible” it also points to the problematic nature of a definitive explanation of literature.
there is neither a definitive understanding nor a final validation, literature becomes, at best, an *as if*, an analogy. Barthes credits Robert with this insight, noting that even though “le récit de Kafka n’est pas tissé de symboles … il est le fruit d’une technique toute différente, celle de l’allusion.”

“Tout autre est allusion,” writes Barthes, who continues to explain how allusion “renvoie l’événement romanesque à autre chose que lui-même, mais à quoi ?” The opening allowed by the question “but to what ?” is the uncertainty of the perspective hinted at by the narrative consciousness. It could be *this* or *that* … or something else entirely. Barthes maintains that allusion “est une force défective, elle défait l’analogie sitôt qu’elle l’a posée.” This undoing, or doing *as if* not doing, creating *as if* not creating, is an integral part of the nature of fiction. Lives are lived, deaths occur, loves are lost, but only in the analogous space of fiction. These life events are only lived *as if* they are lived. These elements are radicalized in Kafka, because, according to Barthes, “Kafka fonde son œuvre en en supprimant systématiquement les *comme si* : mais c’est l’événement intérieur qui devient le terme obscure de l’allusion.” Barthes relates this suppression to what he found in Robert’s first study: the *yes* … *but*. “Chaque récit,” explains Robert “chaque roman contient ainsi un ‘oui’ et un ‘mais’ prononcés avec une force égale.” Barthes goes further by acknowledging that “le trajet qui sépare le *oui* du *mais*, c’est toute l’incertitude des signes, et c’est parce que les signes sont incertains qu’il

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143 Ibid.
144 Ibid., 141.
145 Ibid., 141 (author’s emphasis).
Barthes and Robert explore in their examinations of these two expressions (“yes … but” and as if) the intimate relationship between literary language and sign systems.

In discussing sign systems and the language of literature, Robert uses the example of *The Trial*, which, she maintains, “est une simple description de ce qui se passe quand [Kafka] confronte cette situation avec les images que le langage lui propose.” Kafka, by this theory, having imagined the arrest of Joseph K., need only abandon himself to language and let it guide him through the telling. Barthes adds that Joseph “K. se sent arrêté, et tout se passe comme si K. était réellement arrêté.” Yes, he has been arrested but he is not taken to prison. *Yes*, K. arrives at *The Castle* village as a Land Surveyor but nobody acknowledges his position. Echoing Robert, Barthes reminds us that “les rapports de Kafka et du monde sont réglés par un perpétuel : oui, mais…” and he draws a still larger conclusion: “On peut le dire de toute notre littérature moderne.”

Blanchot’s “Kafka et la littérature” is at first an overview of Kafka criticism, but it also questions similar themes to those examined by Robert and Barthes. And yet he takes a wholly different point of departure; “Il semble,” he begins,

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147 Barthes, 141.
149 The fact that Kafka’s novels were unfinished is perhaps related to this peculiarity. Blanchot theorized that Kafka’s texts were never completed because by giving himself over to the possibility of language and literature, he would necessarily have to follow every path and every possibility that language afforded him. In the end, Blanchot thought this was impossible and is one reason that Kafka’s novels remain “incomplete.” We will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Three.
150 Barthes, 141 (author’s emphasis).
151 Ibid., (author’s emphasis).
Blanchot is outlining the language of literature, which does not allow itself to be defined easily. If Kafka’s analogous writing is a doing as if not doing, then the éloignement mentioned by Blanchot is a vital part of literary creation. The writer, as subject, must distance himself from himself, he must speak as if not speaking. The writer, in this model, becomes a sort of decentralized subject. Blanchot, still referring to Kafka, describes a process of distanciation whereby “Tout se passe comme si, plus il s’éloignait de lui-même, plus il devenait présent. Le récit de fiction met … une distance, un intervalle … sans lequel il ne pourrait s’exprimer.” It is not enough to say “Je suis malheureux” because je is too close, je must distance itself, “Ce n’est qu’à partir du moment où j’en arrive à cette substitution étrange: Il est malheureux, que le langage commence à se constituer en langage malheureux pour moi.” Blanchot asserts that, “L’art est un comme si;” art is a substitution, and language, “se détruit en substituant.”

Barthes, it seems, writes in a similar vein as Blanchot regarding this theme. I repeat Barthes’ claim that, “Le trajet qui sépare le oui du mais, c’est toute l’incertitude des signes, et c’est parce que les signes sont incertains qu’il y a une littérature.” The space between the yes and the but is similar to the space (éloignement) found in Blanchot’s equation for literature; it is similar to the space between je and il. It is an

153 Ibid., 82.
154 Ibid., 87 (my emphasis).
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid., 83.
157 Barthes, 141.
unpronounceable, unwriteable space, and it is this space that critics are drawn toward in Kafka’s work. Barthes continues, “La technique de Kafka dit que le sens du monde n’est pas énonçable, que la seule tâche de l’artiste, c’est d’explorer des significations possibles, dont chacune prise à part ne sera que mensonge (nécessaire) mais dont la multiplicité sera la vérité même de l’écrivain.” 158 This idea reiterates Robert’s equation between truth and error in Kafka’s texts, and Blanchot addresses it with some vehemence: “Nous ne comprenons [l’œuvre de Kafka] qu’en la trahissant, et notre lecture tourne anxieusement autour d’un malentendu.” 159 This statement, it seems, is applicable in a general sense to all literature and art.

As we read Barthes and Blanchot treatment of Kafka’s writing, we notice gaps and problems with the communicability of truth; it is not just the message that is lost on the reader, but even the writer doubts the conveyance of anything meaningful. Blanchot claims that “écrire, c’est nommer le silence, c’est écrire en s’empêchant d’écrire.” 160 Such a notion is possible in art because “la littérature est le lieu des contradictions et des désaccords.” 161 These contradictions are reinforced by Barthes, who names them “le paradoxe de Kafka : l’art dépend de la vérité, mais la vérité, étant indivisible, ne peut se connaître elle-même : dire la vérité, c’est mentir. Ainsi l’écrivain est la vérité, et pourtant quand il parle, il ment.” 162 This concept does have important consequences for language and the sign systems that constitute it. Robert explains that “A cause de sa dégradation, le symbole est sans action immédiate sur la vie. A cause de sa prétention à être vrai, il

158 Ibid., 141-42.
159 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 74.
160 Ibid., 93.
161 Ibid., 90.
162 Barthes, 142.
ment.” These troubling aporia are all linked to the writer’s anxiety at the prospect of communicating meaning, which is perhaps just another way of saying that the writer does not control the meaning. The problem of meaning, truth, and communicability are thus confronted at both ends of the writing process: the writer does not write what he wants, and once it has been written, meaning has fled from his control.

Art is as if the writer were telling the truth, as if (s)he were constructing certainty, and as if (s)he were telling a story. At first this may seem to be an appropriate perspective in response to the fragility of sign systems as well as the uncertain construction of works of fiction across genre, be it the fantastic, the epic, or the modernist narrative. This fragility relates to both Barthes and Robert’s formulation of yes ... but as well as the inherent but is not of the second as if construction. That is to say that one could read any given fiction and, upon its completion, think, “but is not.” Opening Aminadab, one could think that “it was as if Thomas saw a hand signal” and then add “but did not.” Picking up Kafka’s The Trial, a reader is in a position to think, “It is as if” and begin reading: It is as if “someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning,” and continue reading until the cryptic conclusion, “as if the shame were to outlive him,” and then add, “but it did not.” This is the power of literature and its weakness. What are the implications of the fact that the text says as if rather than stating that “the shame outlived him?” Such a cryptic, unresolved ending, especially with an analogous construction instead of something more fixed, amplifies the

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163 Robert, Kafka. 125.
164 Kafka, The Trial, 1. The “as if” is understood and replaced by “must have”—this must have is representative of the reduced perspective of the narrator, and implied “but we can’t be sure” follows this sentence as well. The hypothetical, allusion-bound writing we are confronting allows for these multiple readings and validates none of them.
fluidity inherent in literary language. Meanings multiply and no conclusion is valid—or all conclusions are valid.

Toward what do all of these words point? How does one approach an analogy in a meaningful way? This is the task of the reader and the critic. The author writes and steps away; in a conscious or unconscious way, (s)he abandons control. In this discourse of language and writing, it is always as if something has happened. No matter how many times one reads a book, it is only as if an event occurs, as if a truth is conveyed, even as if commentary explains the work. As Barthes rightly claims, it is as if Joseph K. were arrested, and it is as if he were killed “like a dog.” The infinity of a text’s potential meanings and the fact that one can open it and begin from scratch, allow for as if never to fix meaning; there is always slippage.

The Absence of Conclusions and Beginning Again

What we can conclude, having analyzed Robert’s criticism, is that the formal and rhetorical structures identified in Kafka are also functioning in the novels of Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet. By tracing the lineage of Kafka’s influence we learn in what ways these writers engage, interact, and disengage from literary conventions and traditions of the novel dating back to its very origins. We see that many of these conventions are questioned (if not shattered) by Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot, which may translate to a frustrating and difficult reading experience. If we call these novels hell, as some readers no doubt do, then we can turn to Marthe Robert as our Virgil.

Kafka ends The Trial with an as if construction, and so too does Blanchot conclude Aminadab. In the final sentence of Aminadab, after Thomas “pensa alors qu’il
était temps d’obtenir une explication,” he asks “—qui êtes-vous ?” in a voice both
“tranquille et convaincue, et c’était comme si cette question allait lui permettre de tout
tirer au clair.”¹⁶⁵ This final flourish serves to enrich a text that is already loaded with
ambiguities. Thomas’ quest, insofar as we can call it a quest, seems like it may finally
have meaning or be clarified to some degree, but it is in fact only a mirage, an illusion, a
frail analogy. The understanding that seems as if it is in reach is only illusory and false;
we understand that the frustration and exhaustion, as well as the lack of comprehension
and finality, will continue on, seemingly ad infinitum.

Such a conclusion recalls Robert’s question at the end of L’ancien et le nouveau:

Est-ce à dire que la grandeur de la littérature ne peut plus consister que
dans un grandiose constat de sa faillite? ... c’est que l’écrivain astreint au
vrai, sans que sa vérité puisse jamais lui être garantie ... l’art est le
domaine de la contingence, il est désespérément libre, d’une liberté
d’autant plus ambiguë qu’elle n’est que l’envers d’un manque
d’attaches.¹⁶⁶

Less than consisting of nothing but a “grandiose statement of failure,” the rhetoric of
Aminadab, and the novel as a whole, puts everything in abeyance, which is ultimately the
point of another story of Blanchot’s, the short story L’Instant de ma mort. The story is
pushed on into infinity, a repeating land of commentary, experimentation, and rewriting
as if there is no solid ending and no conclusion. It is a call to continue, like Robert citing
Strindberg’s Captain to “Continuons!”

To each emphatic call to continue on, there comes a refrain, “but how?” That is
what as if is. It is a slight phrase that suggests infinitely more than what it says. If
“everything became clear” at the end of Aminadab, we would know where we stood. If

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 290 (my emphasis).
¹⁶⁶ Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 310.
Joseph K. died like a dog and the shame outlived him, we would know where we stood. But it was only as if this shame outlived him, only as if understanding came—pale analogies, incomplete thoughts, an unlived life, and an incomplete writing experiment. So things continue on in abeyance. As we shall continue to see in the following chapter on Blanchot’s literary theory, these *récits*, literary lives, and perfectly unfinished narratives continue on in the afterlife of criticism, experimentation, trial, and ultimately error, a space where what needs to be said can only be said when it is too late, and so we simultaneously hope for and dread the moment when what will provide understanding can be uttered.
From a certain point onward
There is no longer any turning back.
That is the point that must be reached.
(Franz Kafka)

Chapter 3

Maurice Blanchot: Kafka’s Phantom and Vampire

Though we have just analyzed Maurice Blanchot as the writer of Aminadab we have hardly perceived the entire picture of who he is as a writer and figure in French letters of the twentieth century. Maurice Blanchot defies definition and categorization. We have seen that he is a novelist and have studied him as such, and yet, to fully describe his role and import in gaining an understanding of Kafka’s place in French fiction and criticism, we must next confront Blanchot the writer of L’Espace littéraire, L’Entretien infini, La Part au feu, and L’Écriture du désastre. The name of Blanchot stands for a body of work, a corpus that includes political journalism, novels, récits, narratives, literary reviews, and philosophical musings. His is a hybrid, fragmentary style that eludes all categorization. As in the case of Franz Kafka, the name Blanchot evokes his writing; to say Kafka is to mean all Kafka’s writing, and to say Blanchot is to mean his style, his thought, and his written record. Blanchot, however, is perhaps even more elusive a figure.

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than Kafka, for Kafka left behind his letters, journals, and friend’s testimonials. A mythical Kafka has grown out of these artifacts. After Blanchot’s studies at Strasbourg and his Parisian journalist career, he virtually disappeared, living a reclusive life, only publicly appearing for the events of May 1968. Otherwise, Blanchot lived through his published words. Christophe Bident performed a small miracle in writing a 500-page biography of a man whose whole life can be summarized with a single verb: he wrote.

**Staging Blanchot’s Critical Voice**

In the previous chapter I examined the ways in which Blanchot’s narrative writing lends itself to a Robertian analysis but in this chapter I will scrutinize Blanchot’s critical writings on Kafka in order to illustrate one of the varied perspectives to Kafka criticism in France. This chapter discusses relevant Blanchot criticism, a chronology and survey of his writing on Kafka, and an analysis of the important themes that are addressed in the essays. We will begin by studying the ways in which Robert and Blanchot overlap, analyze Blanchot’s first encounters with Kafka, and examine the language of fiction, errancy, and absence, which Blanchot positions at literature’s core. We will discuss the *neutre* in Blanchot’s thought and analyze how he staged it within Kafka’s writings.

One cannot underestimate the importance of Franz Kafka to the career, both fictional and critical, of Blanchot. Kafka and his œuvre are the subjects to which Blanchot returns more than to any other in his writings. Even the uninitiated notices the centrality of Kafka to Blanchot’s thought. No other single author was given the privilege of a unified book the way Kafka was. Blanchot’s first book was *Lautréamont and Sade*, but the depth and duration of Blanchot’s devotion to Kafka is unparalleled, as evidenced
by Gallimard’s compilation of Blanchot’s essays, De Kafka à Kafka (1981). Blanchot focused many articles and essays on Mallarmé, Rilke, or René Char, but it is Kafka who proves to be the center of Blanchot’s corpus, even if this corpus is ultimately deprived a center since it tirelessly vacillates between fiction and criticism.

In the preceding chapter’s discussion of Maurice Blanchot’s novel, we were continually confronted with the specter of his theory, which seems at times to overshadow his novels and récits. Beginning in the 1930’s, Blanchot was first introduced to the reading public mostly on account of his articles that were published in right wing journals. In the late 1930’s and early 1940’s his concerns became less overtly political and tended to concentrate on literary and critical musings. These writings were regrouped and published in Faux pas (1943). In this first critical collection, the reader is introduced to ideas and themes that remain consistent in his writing for the next sixty years. Essays treat figures such as Mallarmé, Sartre, Rousseau, Camus, and Sade, and analyze the themes of death, solitude, myth, surrealism, narratology, as well as the very possibility of literature. Faux pas serves not only as a concrete example of Blanchot firmly establishing himself as a critical theorist of serious and mature judgments, it demonstrates his abandonment of politically tinged journalism. It is true that politics would remain in the background of his writing for the remainder of his career, but from 1943 until his death in 2003, his publishing life is recognizable as a continuous interaction with the literary domain in all its variegated forms.

Six years after Faux pas, in la Part du feu (1949), a second recueil of Blanchot’s articles were assembled and published by Gallimard, and it is in this collection that we
see the first essays devoted to Kafka as well as criticism that address the contemporary interest paid to the Prague writer. Kafka figures prominently in Blanchot’s best known works, *L’Espace littéraire* (1955) and *L’Entretien infini* (1969). Roger Laporte even quipped in “Une Passion” (1973) that Kafka was the hero of *l’Espace littéraire*. The remainder of Blanchot’s critical output is diverse, but it always interacts with the same concerns as his earlier works, namely the possibility of fiction, the voice of literature, the ambiguities of language, and the solitude which is a condition of the work of art.

In this chapter, whose focus is Blanchot’s reading of Kafka, we will have necessary recourse to concepts both influenced and responding to the writings of Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas. We will, however, be roaming a predominantly literary space. Blanchot’s treatment of philosophy has precedents and fits into a neater discursive tradition. As for his treatment of literary themes, brimming with philosophy as they are, a less distinct tradition is present. These separate traditions are apparent in Blanchot’s secondary literature because we can notice a rift between what can be said to be more philosophically oriented criticism and that which is more literary minded (admitting that much overlap exists).

Even as we offer a sketch-like survey of Blanchot’s work, it must be recognized that a tension exists in Blanchot’s work. This tension can be described as a conflict between Blanchot’s literary interests and his ontological concerns that grew out of the tradition of Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas. Blanchot’s writing is a hybrid of fiction, literary criticism, and investigations into the nature of being and the origin of the work of
art. All of his essays display interests that go beyond simply fiction or philosophy or criticism when it comes to critics interpreting and interacting with his work.

The most common philosophical concepts appearing in Blanchot’s work come from the work of Hegel and Kojève’s French introduction to the philosopher’s work. Dialectics and the work of negation (what Blanchot often terms désavouement) play an integral role in Blanchot’s theory. Paul Davies, in his 2006 article discussing the presence of Kafka in Blanchot, describes this negativity as an either/or option: “Either we can read the ‘not’ in ‘not negative’ as no longer straightforwardly negative in which case it is not strong enough to negate the negative that follows it or we can read it as simply negative in which case it leaves us unable to read the opening ‘neither negative.’”² The circularity of the negative options carries “a negative resonance which, negating the one and the other, causes the other to resonate.”³ It is perhaps this very resonance which we will be studying throughout this chapter. Blanchot’s manner of composing his work situates itself almost entirely in the movement of negation.

Whereas in Hegel’s philosophy, consciousness, spirit, and death are teleological points toward which an argument projects itself, in Blanchot, no telos can be discerned. Instead, arguments circle around themselves in a display of negation, absence, and emptiness; this philosophical idea recurs, and will inform our approach to Blanchot’s conception of language. Influenced as much by Mallarmé’s poetry as by Hegel’s philosophy, Blanchot is indebted to both writers for his conception of language. Language as negation is a communication of meaning that erases the particularity of the

³ Ibid., 28.
referent. To say ‘this woman,’ to use Blanchot’s own example, is to negate the particularity of the actual woman. This argument is fleshed out in *La Littérature et le droit à la mort*. It is important to recognize Hegel’s role in Blanchot’s thought, and as we treat this article we will remain conscious of Hegel’s influence even as we focus on Blanchot’s approach to Kafka.

The roles that Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Levinas play in Blanchot’s interrogation of literature and philosophy are varied and difficult to categorize concretely. Heidegger’s conceptions of death and being figure prominently in Blanchot’s discussions of poetry and the possibility of literature. From the inquiry of the possibility of literature, Blanchot will come to say that literature is. Both Blanchot and Heidegger write extensively about Hölderlin, but we see that Blanchot’s treatment of death is dialoguing with Heidegger’s. Blanchot describes, in many essays, the incomprehensible nature of death, and shifts his focus from death, an unknowable, singular event, to dying, which is stronger than death. From Heidegger’s ontology and its subsequent influence on the tradition of phenomenology, we can understand Blanchot’s own obsession with subjectivity, the ability to say “I” in literature, as well as the nature of the being of literature. By asking if literature is possible and interrogating the nature of the possibility of literature, Blanchot is participating in a Heideggerian tradition of ontology.

Levinas and Blanchot were lifelong friends, Levinas being the only friend with whom Blanchot shared the familiar address *tu*. Studies by Large, Bruns, and Hill have analyzed the mutual influence these two thinkers exerted on one another. Just as it is difficult to distinguish where Blanchot’s fiction separates itself from his philosophy, it is
difficult to attribute ideas of the other, insomnia, *il y a*, and the demand of ethics. What is more important is to acknowledge their relationship as an ongoing conversation. Blanchot frequently refers to the *il y a*, the raw being of existence, a space that is. Like Levinas, the *il y a* is experienced in the uncomfortable state of insomnia. One is exiled, in a sense, to experiencing the terrifying essence of existence and yet any description or interaction with this state seems beyond grasp. From Blanchot’s interaction with *il y a* and insomnia we can begin to understand such novels as *Le Très Haut* and to describe themes in his writings on Kafka, such as the desert, solitude, the “other night,” and errancy.

From Blanchot’s reading and interaction with these philosophers, we can thus question, as has been done previously, the classification of Blanchot: is he more concerned with philosophy or literature? Does he write about the philosophy of literature or the literariness of philosophy? The answer, naturally, is both, and neither. Blanchot’s principal concerns come from philosophical traditions of being, death, and subjectivity. However, Blanchot’s subjects are most frequently literary figures whose importance to the world of aesthetics cannot be questioned. This puts the interpreter of Blanchot into a difficult position. In order to navigate the literary terrain that Blanchot maps, one must frequently refer to a key which is often composed of very dense philosophical notions.

There are roughly two periods of publication of secondary literature about Blanchot. The first studies came from France in the early 1970’s, when Francoise Collin published her book-length study on Blanchot, followed the same year by Evelyn Poulet published a chapter in 1971 as well. In 1960 Garnier published a book which collected critical responses to Franz Kafka and cited several long passages from the 1943 essay *Kafka et la littérature*. Likewise, we have already mentioned Maja Goth’s 1956 discussion of Blanchot’s fiction as well as Sartre’s 1947 essay on *Aminadab* and the fantastic.

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4 Poulet published a chapter in 1971 as well. In 1960 Garnier published a book which collected critical responses to Franz Kafka and cited several long passages from the 1943 essay *Kafka et la littérature*. Likewise, we have already mentioned Maja Goth’s 1956 discussion of Blanchot’s fiction as well as Sartre’s 1947 essay on *Aminadab* and the fantastic.
Londyn’s analysis of Blanchot the novelist, and Roger LaPorte and Bernard Noël’s *Deux lectures de Maurice Blanchot*. Earlier and in essay form, Foucault published *La Pensée du dehors* (1966), Poulet published a chapter devoted to Blanchot in *La Conscience critique* (1971), and Paul de Man offered a chapter on impersonality in the “Criticism of Maurice Blanchot” from *Blindness and Insight* (1973). A second wave of Blanchot scholarship appears in the mid to late 1990’s and continues through the present. In this wave we notice a more international output of publishing, and more voices of American and English critics joins the French writing of the 1970’s. Anne-Lise Schulte Nordholt published the influential *Maurice Blanchot: l’écriture comme experience du dehors* (1995) and many other works followed by William Large, Leslie Hill, Gerard Bruns, Kevin Hart, Chantal Michel, as well as Christophe Bident’s indispensable biography *Partenaire invisible* (1998).

An impressive variety of approaches and critical concerns is to be found in the secondary literature devoted to Blanchot, and its scope reflects the nature of Blanchot’s writings. Critics such as Bruns, Hill, Robbins, and Hart tend to focus on questions of being whereas a focus on literary tropes is present in the writing of Nordholt, Gregg, and Hill, the last of whom seems most interested in bridging the philosophico-literary gap. Because Blanchot’s own training is not, strictly speaking, philosophically oriented, critics have a difficult time categorizing him and his writing. He is not a philosopher *per se*, and he is not a Sturcturalist or deconstructionist literary critic, even if he was enormously influential to those who wrote during the 1970’s. He is, to borrow one of his recurring words, outside. His writing project, obsessed as it is with origins, being, death, solitude,
and absence, evades any concrete description. As his work is unsummarizable by its very nature and because his writing slowly dissolves into fragmentary and aphoristic styles toward the end of his career (L’Entretien infini, Le Pas au-delà, and L’Ecriture du désastre) Blanchot’s commentators offer a dizzying array of approaches, conclusions, philosophical speculation, and literary interpretation.

“Kafka’s Phantom and Vampire”

In Helene Cixous’ Readings (1981), she writes, in the chapter “Writing and the Law,” that Blanchot preys upon Kafka “incessantly” and evokes the vampiric and posthumous image of phantoms to describe the French critic. Cixous is not alone in evoking the image of bloodsucking and phantasmagoria as regards either Blanchot or Kafka; Deleuze and Guattari devote several paragraphs to Kafka’s insomnia (his letter writing as a parallel of Dracula sending out his bats, and the draining of blood as a metaphor of the writer). Maja Goth, as early as 1956, also asks her reader to turn away from the superficial similarities that French surrealists or Henri Michaux share with Kafka and instead refers to Blanchot as an author who reaches the “essence” of Kafka.5 This essence may be read rhetorically as a blood-bond or as the profound similarities that inform their approaches to literature and to the way they led their respective lives.

There are five dates integral to Blanchot’s treatment of Kafka: 1949, 1955, 1959, 1969, and 1971.6 These were the years when the Kafka essays were republished, but we

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6 The first published essay by Blanchot on Kafka appeared in 1945 when L’Arche published “La Lecture de Kafka.” It was collected, with 1947’s “Kafka et la littérature” and “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” to be published in La Part au feu along with an original chapter, “Le Langage de fiction” (1949). There are, in fact, two parallel chronologies of Blanchot’s writing on Kafka. The first chronology consists of the original appearance of essays and articles as published in journals—frequently in La (Nouvelle) Nouvelle Revue Française, but also in Critique, Arche, and Cahiers de la Pléiade. The second chronology is composed of
must also mention 1981, for in that year they were collected and published as De Kafka à Kafka. This collection of essays on Kafka poses a series of problems: 1) The essays were compiled and published by Gallimard with no preface or introductory remarks; 2) they are not published in chronological order nor do they follow a strict thematic ordering; 3) some essays, such as “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” have only a tangential reference to Kafka while the rest of the essay seems to have no direct relationship to his work.

The omission of two articles devoted to Kafka is striking for neither of them is inconsequential: “Le Langage de fiction” (1949) and “La Douleur du dialogue” (1959). The first analyzes the gap between the way that language functions on a literary level and on a daily level. Not only does this essay reference Kafka, but it relies on a seemingly banal citation, otherwise ignored by critics, taken from The Castle: “Le chef du bureau a téléphoné.”

The lack of inclusion of this essay is surprising for it seems more relevant than “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” which makes only a passing reference to Kafka. It is notable that the former was included, whereas the latter is a perfectly complementary companion to “La littérature et le droit à la mort” since it is concerned with the properties
of language, its relationship to objects and life as well as having a more direct interaction with literary and Structuralist themes than the historic-onotological preoccupations of “La Littérature et le droit à la mort.”

“La solitude essentielle” and “La parole errante,” which comprise the opening chapters of L’Espace littéraire, were both omitted from De Kafka à Kafka. This can perhaps be explained by their thematic similarities to “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre” which immediately follows them in this volume. What is more surprising is the absence of “La Douleur du dialogue”. This essay is unique in that it is a profound interrogation of the practice of criticism as well as the difficulty of dialogue. This last theme, especially as it foreshadows many of the motifs of L’Entretien infini, may have been a beneficial addition to De Kafka à Kafka.

Another noticeable particularity in this collection regards L’Ecriture du désastre (1980). This aphoristic, fragmentary oeuvre—perhaps the apotheosis of Blanchot’s writing style—offers three fragments whose subject is Kafka. One of these was shortened and serves as the epigraph to De Kafka à Kafka. The other two were not included. The omission of these fragments is logical insofar as they have neither title nor contextual framing. De Kafka à Kafka was not designed to be the final word on the Blanchot - Kafka relationship and yet it is meant to provide the reader with the essence of their literary and critical kinship. In the absence of any editorial or critical preface, how is one to interpret these dense essays or the complicated nature of Blanchot’s use of Kafka?

In Blanchot’s critical work, nothing is to be taken at face value, not words like conversation, writing, work (œuvre) literature, livre, solitude, or the concept of the
neutre. Even in listing the key words in Blanchot’s work, we encounter the challenge of Blanchot’s vocabulary. “Language” is often used as a synonym for writing or literature and other times it refers to the semiological nature of signs. “Fiction” refers to the novel, poetry, or any written form. “Solitude” is not Rousseau’s or Rilke’s form of solitude—a self-reflexive removal of oneself from society—but rather a particular relationship or condition that the author experiences while engaged with the “work.” As Blanchot’s terminology is encountered in the coming pages, we will remain vigilant to clarify his use of certain terms.

Like Blanchot, Cixous is also interested in questioning texts so as to study “the origin of the gesture of writing and not writing itself.”8 This theme is pursued in the first essay of Readings which is a comparative study asking the question: what is “wild writing” in Clarice Lispector’s novel Wild at Heart and how does this novel compare to Joyce, Kafka, and Blanchot in order to ask still more pressing questions about writing: “not who but from where?”9 This query echoes Blanchot’s examination into the origin of language and fiction. Though Cixous is primarily concerned with Kafka’s “Before the Law” and Lispector’s proximity to this parable (Cixous puns “Before the Apple”), she also elaborates on the thematic unity between Blanchot and Kafka.

Cixous begins her discussion of Blanchot with an allusion to vampires. This allusion can be understood as a way of viewing Blanchot as a quasi-plagiarist of Kafka in the pages of L’Ecriture du désastre. Cixous’ treatment of Blanchot and Kafka demonstrates how these two writers overlap, especially as concerns the conflict between

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9 Cixous, 2.
life and art and their own approach to the fictional worlds of their creation. What is perhaps lacking in Cixous’ assessment, however, is the concept of errancy and error. However, in light of her descriptions of the themes common to both writers, such as the writer’s posthumous posturing in regards to the work and the writing experiment, we should consider this vampire allusion as a mere rhetorical device. Cixous, in reference to Kafka, echoes Robert’s treatment of the writer’s conflict between art and life. She refers to these two worlds and raises the question of Flaubert’s well-known devotional attitude toward art. We will see how these themes will reappear in Blanchot’s “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre” and “La Solitude essentielle.” Still more crucial, however, is her discussion of the Law in Kafka, Lispector, and Blanchot. In what is perhaps an oblique reference to Blanchot’s conception of language’s (and literature’s) attribute of evoking not an object, but rather the object’s absence, Cixous refers to the Law as an absence in Kafka’s “Before the Law.” In what could also serve as a cryptic summary of Aminadab, Cixous states that “The Law in Kafka says: ‘You will not enter,’ because if you do, you will discover that I do not exist.”¹⁰ We will learn that this discourse of absence and negation in the law parallels Blanchot’s approach to language. Words do not offer up an object, they merely signal the absence of an object. Blanchot, in “Le Langage de fiction,” calls words phantoms, existing in the posthumous space left by an absent object, like a vampire—the living dead, unable to die but always present.¹¹

If Blanchot is Kafka’s vampire and phantom, we can imagine Blanchot burying his fangs into Kafka’s corpus, extracting its lifeblood, its essence, fortifying himself

¹⁰ Cixous, 24.
¹¹ In Bogues’s chapter on the self in “Foucault, Deleuze, and the Playful Fold of the Self,” he treats this theme in the context of memory and the Self.
while leaving the host pale, weak, and stigmatized with puncture wounds, robbed, ill, and empty. If Blanchot is Kafka’s phantom he is perhaps an imposter. An apparition which appears to be the original itself, yet is only illusory, unreal. But phantom also implies ghost, as if Kafka came back to life, as if the essence of Kafka has been resuscitated critically, like the Lazarus to which Blanchot frequently alludes in L’Espace littéraire. And so Blanchot both embodies Kafka and fools us that he has done so. The essence of Kafka can be found in the essays but we realize it is not Kafka at all. Kafka remains apart, broken off, unknowable, exiled in the desert of his own fictional creation, accessible only by way of his original writing and the criticism which evokes him to no end, criticism which repeats him and also fails him. Criticism, as we noted in regard to Robert, only reinforces the hopelessness of interpretation and the inconclusiveness of the interpretative task. In Blanchot we move from hopelessness and inconclusiveness of criticism to the infinity of the task of analysis.

**La belle cruauté d’analyse**

In “Le Pont de bois” (1964), Blanchot’s eighth essay on Kafka, and the last of his attempts at interacting directly with Kafka’s fiction, we see for the first time a thinker textually interact with Marthe Robert about Kafka. Discussing L’Ancien et le Nouveau, Blanchot wants not to summarize nor necessarily to validate Robert’s ideas about Kafka and *The Castle* but rather to re-engage them. Whereas Robert criticizes commentators and readers alike for committing the “sin of exegesis,” Blanchot, in preserving the spirit of Robert’s work, discusses her preoccupation with the split between life and literature as
well as The Castle’s status as a “bibliothèque universelle.” In this reading, K. the Land Surveyor surveys the literary terrain to such an extent that The Castle acts as a palimpsest of literary history. The Castle, then, is written atop tried literary genres, conventions, and traditions. It interacts with them and yet remains opaque, allowing the reader to see the faint etchings of the literary past lying dormant beneath. Within the space of The Castle, on top of these literary traditions, K. wanders.

K. wanders through literature the same way that Don Quixote does; like his seventeenth-century literary brethren, K. “a beaucoup lu et il croit à ce qu’il a lu” to the extent that he could pursue his goals to “apprendre si le monde correspond à l’enchantement littéraire.” Blanchot is remarkably faithful to Robert’s writing, whom he mentions in a footnote to the effect of how she, “poursuivant par le moyen de ces deux livres une réflexion sur la littérature, a dégagé, mieux que tout autre commentateur, l’entreprise dévastatrice de Cervantes par laquelle l’Âge d’Or des Belles Lettres prend fin ou commence à finir.” He summarizes that both Don Quixote and The Castle are examples in which “le texte où se raconte ses exploits n’est pas un livre, mais une référence à d’autres livres.”

Returning to the most simple description of literary criticism, Blanchot explains that “nous avons lu un livre, nous le commentons. En le commentant, nous nous apercevons que ce livre n’est lui-même qu’un commentaire, la mise en livre d’autres

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12 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 191.
13 Ibid., 185.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 186
livres auxquels il renvoie.”\textsuperscript{16} This relationship seems straight forward, and the connection between a book and its commentary almost defies closer examination. However, any examination does reveal that the original book is part of a tradition and is dialoguing with that tradition; it is commenting on previous books in its own way. Blanchot continues, “Notre commentaire, nous l’écrivons, nous l’élevons au rang d’ouvrage. Devenu chose publiée et chose publique, à son tour il attirera un commentaire qui, à son tour…”\textsuperscript{17} The relationship between the original book and commentary elicits an endless series of new works commenting on the commentary, and Blanchot is staging his later argument with this taken-for-granted observation.

Referring to the merits of Robert’s work, Blanchot does not repeat what she has produced (as this would be antithetical to the very nature of his essay), but proceeds to ask, even if rhetorically, why can we not trust an original work to speak for itself?\textsuperscript{18} He questions the possibility of his task, of the critic’s task and exhibiting his career-long curiosity in regards to a book (oeuvre, novel, etc.)’s ability to both stand alone and remain in need of interpretation or, as he will state it in the following paragraph, “de répéter l’œuvre” which he calls a pretention, an arrogance. He is describing the impotence of both the book and its commentary to satisfy the demands of writing—they are constantly being repeated, “Mais [répéter l’œuvre], c’est saisir — entendre — en elle la répétition qui la fonde comme œuvre unique.”\textsuperscript{19} We are confronted by the impulse to

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Why must we “tenir l’œuvre, le beau chef d’œuvre que nous révèrons pour incapable de se parler lui-même ?” (Ibid., 187).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 187.
repeat a work while also being aware of the unique attributes of a work whose repetition is obstinately impossible.

Repetition, by means of exegesis, is inevitable, superfluous, and necessary all at once. Inevitable because the work may not be immediately comprehensible. Superfluous because a unique work already is in existence, and necessary because it opens the world to a new expression, a new œuvre, a new parole: “La répétition du livre par le commentaire est ce mouvement grâce auquel une nouvelle parole, s’introduisant dans le manque qui fait parler l’œuvre, parole nouvelle et cependant la même, prétend le remplir, le combler.”\(^{20}\) A work is complete and yet its completion reveals a void, and the commentary which follows the work seeks to fill it. In his later ethics-oriented texts, Blanchot writes of a similar need which is the silence which follows a conversation—it is a call to the other to respond. In the case of literature, commentary fills the gap which the literary work leaves in its wake. The fact, however, that any commentary will itself become a new work calling for new commentary reveals how “[elle] tend irrésistiblement à se redire, exigeant cette parole infinie du commentaire où, séparée d’elle-même par la belle cruauté de l’analyse ... elle attend que soit mis fin au silence qui lui est propre.”\(^{21}\) These commentaries are only repeating themselves until a figurative silence overwhelms them—threatened by silence, criticism tries to break the silence with new works and new words. Such is the beautiful cruelty of analysis.\(^{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 188.
\(^{21}\) Ibid. (my emphasis).
\(^{22}\) “Plus une œuvre se remarque, plus elle appelle de commentaires; plus elle entretient avec son centre de rapports de “réflexion” (de redoublement), plus à cause de cette dualité elle se rend énigmatique. C’est le cas de Don Quichotte. C’est, avec plus d’évidence encore, le cas du Château.”(De Kafka à Kafka, 190)
The difficulty of repeating what has already been said leads Blanchot to ask a question at once rhetorical and demanding of an answer: “Alors, à quoi bon commenter?” He toys with this question before concluding that this very question is itself superfluous, instead focusing on the way that “la nécessité de répéter ne peut nullement s’éluder, puisqu’elle ne se surajoute pas à l’ouvrage et n’est pas imposée par les seules habitudes de la communication sociale.”23 Instead of shrugging one’s shoulders at the hopeless task of commentary, Blanchot suggests that since criticism cannot fulfill all of the work’s needs, criticism must continue. No single answer exists so we need as many as possible. No single perspective can satisfy the work of art, and so as many perspectives as possible must be composed. In the realm of translation, there cannot be imagined a translation so perfect that it would replace the original, and so one must continue to pursue as many translations as possible of any given text.24 In this case, translation becomes a form of criticism; each translation would offer a unique reading of the original.

Criticism is not static, Blanchot tells us. It is impatient, agitated, and ambitious. The critic is “non pas un reproducteur fidèle, un répétiteur immobile, mais celui qui porte en avant la répétition et, par elle, remplit les vies ou les élargit par le moyen de nouvelles péripéties, ouvre, bouche les fissures et, finalement, à force de combler le poème, le distend jusqu’à la volatilisation.”25 The critic, like K., is a nomad, who is constantly seeking and perhaps never finding. It is for this reason that Blanchot, like Robert, loses patience with critics who propose fixed meanings for Kafka or any literary product.

23 Ibid., 189.
24 We may be reminded of the hypothetical translation of Don Quixote which is the novel repeated word for word. We may also imagine an exegesis of The Castle which is The Castle written out word for word.
25 Ibid., 189 (my emphasis). Le poème, in this instance, is to be understood as a synonym of work, book, or fiction.
Critics struggle to interpret Kafka’s unfinished novels, and instead of allowing the novel to open up possibilities in their criticism, their static exegeses attempt to close the work. But for a work to be complete, it necessarily needs to lack something, and this, too, is the role of commentary, to find this absence, describe it, prolong it, and exist in its lack.

Kafka’s work, as Robert outlines it, offers an acute example of commentary gone haywire, and Blanchot laments such a “fureur d’exégèse” and asks “d’où vient ce délire?” The fury of explanation, quite naturally, comes from Kafka himself, from The Castle, from the book itself. Kafka, as a writer, is continually seen as “se posant la question d’écrire,” which is not an academic question but really a 3,000-year-old Judaic concern. Blanchot follows this observation by comparing the thrust of The Castle with that of Don Quixote. Whereas Don Quixote is concerned with the question of books—think of the crazed Knight Errant’s delirious attempt to relive his favorite romantic feats—The Castle tends to focus on the question of writing. The question may not be explicit—there are but few scenes of pens, ink, and paper—but it is inherent in the very structure of the text for the simple fact that

la pérégrination de K. ne consiste pas à aller de lieu en lieu, mais d’une exégèse à une exégèse, d’un commentaire à un commentaire, à écouter

26 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 190.
27 Departing slightly from Robert, Blanchot pursues the wanderings of K., sometimes bound within the pages of the book, other times beyond the limits of the fictive realm. K., faced with the limitlessness of interpretation as regards the Castle’s bureaucracy, leads a wandering existence which echoes in many ways “la trame même de l’existence juive depuis des millénaires” (Ibid., 192). The Jewish themes of wandering, exile, the Law, and the Tetragram become important subjects in L’Entretien infini as well as L’Ecriture du désastre, and we see Blanchot beginning to bring such concepts to the forefront of his writing. This wandering existence also recalls “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre” from L’Espace littéraire. In the context of the current essay, however, Blanchot is establishing a thematic foundation to begin his meta-analysis of analysis itself and the very existence of commentary and interpretation. Blanchot highlights the idea that these concepts are all focused on the Book. Truth, insofar as it can be imagined, resides elsewhere, far from the rules of life, and this elsewhere becomes a hazy synonym for Judaism. Elsewhere, “ce n’est pas le monde, c’est un livre, le mystère et le commandement d’un livre,” (ibid.) and it is in this Book that the power of the word and of exegesis reside.
chacun d’eux avec une attention passionnée, puis à intervenir et à discuter avec toute leçon une méthode d’examen exhaustif qu’il serait faute de rapprocher de certains tours de dialectique talmudique.28

_The Castle_, then, is not a series of events but a series of exegeses which “ne portent finalement que sur la possibilité même d’exégèse.”29 So the actual exegesis matters less than the persistent nature of said exegesis; writing and interpretation become enfolded in a chain of subsequent commentaries and each exegesis requires another. This trend, as the novel progresses, becomes a reflection and a narration within the novel. The reader attempts to interpret while the characters do the same, and a hierarchy becomes apparent, though the final answer remains elusive. The indeterminacy of these endless commentaries reveals one of the fundamental paradoxes of Kafka’s art that Robert aptly points out as “disant le vrai sans dire le vrai.”30

This paradoxical phrase, itself an echo of Blanchot’s statement that “la vérité des livres est la déception,”31 twists in on itself and reveals the problematic nature of not just Kafka’s art but all literature, and the abundant critical literature that endeavors to assess it. In the context of both _The Trial_ and _The Castle_, though any individual sentence or observation _may_ be true, the whole statement becomes dubious. At the same time, many false premises, incomplete assumptions, and lengthy speeches whose truth may be unfounded manage to lay bare an even more profound truth. One lives in doubt, one’s assumptions are subverted, but this doubt allows a glimmer of truth to be seen. This glimmer, this flash of truth, however, disappears in an instant and one returns to doubt,

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28 Blanchot, _De Kafka à Kafka_, 194.
29 Ibid., 195.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 186.
skeptical if it was ever witnessed, suspicious of one’s ability to perceive as well as express it. Expression and perception become blended, lost, re-found, doubted, and made suspect, and yet the illusive truth is felt though unfelt, believed though doubted, pursued, though without hope of actually arriving at it. This is “la belle cruauté d’analyse.”

If this procedure describes the exegetical process, how does one know it has been performed? In Kafka’s case (with K. and Joseph K.) we can assume it is accomplished in the character’s death. Blanchot refers to this end as an exegetical death. Like Robert, Blanchot refutes many of the prevailing readings of The Castle and refuses to acknowledge this novel as K.’s dogged pursuit of grace. Instead, K. is only “en présence d’une exégèse du salut.” Grace is never defined, though it is talked about at length, and it is these discussions that so exhaust K.; the talk of salvation is the only salvation he will ever know. Blanchot observes that it is this form of communication, not grace, that is present in The Castle. As we pursue the commentaries, we once more return to the unavoidable sensation that something is missing. Of course, The Castle was never completed, but there is also a hole in the center of the work as if “ce qu’une œuvre dit, elle le dit en taisant quelque chose (mais non par une affectation de secret).”32 Returning to the mysterious silence, Blanchot believes, is the core of the work.

The work speaks, Blanchot writes, but “Elle le dit en se taisant elle-même.”33 But the silence at the center of the work prolongs the infinite character of the work and of the criticism it creates. This hollow center of the work, as regards The Castle, is not God, as some critics have claimed, or salvation as others would have it, it is not even truth as a

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32 Ibid., 188.
33 Ibid.
more moderate option. No, Blanchot names it “le neutre.”34 Blanchot’s *neutre* is not the same neutral that Robert uses to describe *The Castle*. In Robert’s writing, the neutrality of Kafka is found in the report-like language that Kafka employs and also in the indifference of the Castle, the system, to K.’s problems. The Castle does not seek to harm K. nor does it seek to aid him. It is an inanimate object that cannot even conceive of K. Such is Robert’s conception of the neutral. In the case of Blanchot’s approach to the *neutre*, we must abandon all of our preconceptions.

Blanchot’s *neutre* is both immanent and transcendent. It is a mode deprived of subjectivity. Because *The Castle* has been the subject of so much representation, Blanchot uses this novel (and object) as a sort of example of the *neutre* which “l’on ne peut pas s’y tenir, parce que le neutre ne saurait être représenté ni symbolisé ni même signifié.” We can conclude that *The Castle* is not a representation of something, nor a symbol, nor does it have a traditional meaning. Blanchot takes this example and generalizes *The Castle* to a larger fictional utterance: “comme [si le neutre] était le point de fuite à l’infini à partir duquel la parole du récit et, en elle, tous récits et toute parole sur tout récit recevraient et perdraient leur perspective, infinie distance des rapports, leur perpétuel renversement, leur abolition.”35 The *neutre*, in this case, is an avowal and a refusal, an acceptance and denial. It is the gaining and losing of perspective. It is all *récits* in one, and simultaneously, their total absence.

Blanchot concludes his essay with a series of questions about the neutrality at the center of *The Castle*, and about the consequences of this observation. These questions are

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34 Ibid., 199.
unanswered, dissolving into the italic script of his semi-fictional musings, which interrupt the *L'Entretien infini*. Because “Le Pont de bois” is our entry point into the intercrossing of Blanchot and Kafka, we will attempt to describe the importance of the *neutre* as well as the greater implications of this essay in the scope of Blanchot’s writings on Kafka.  

**La Lecture de Kafka**

In “La Lecture de Kafka,” Blanchot begins his first essay on Kafka with a common starting point: Kafka’s wish that his papers be burnt after his death. George Bataille also treats this subject in *La Littérature et le mal* (1957), in the chapter “Faut-il brûler Kafka?” Blanchot approaches this question with sympathy for Kafka; he opens his text wagering that “Kafka a peut-être voulu détruire son œuvre, parce qu’elle lui semblait condamnée à accroître le malentendu universel.” Critics perverted Kafka’s texts into a gloss of any number of theories and Blanchot rued the fact that Kafka’s work, which resists commentary, was invaded “par les bavardages des commentaires.” Critics seem blind to Kafka’s work and betray his truth, but it is a dissimulated truth. As Blanchot maintains in “Le Pont de bois,” a text which bookends this first essay in regard to criticism, “tous les commentateurs nous supplient de chercher dans les récits des récits.”

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36 In regard to language, Blanchot relies on Kafka for four texts that treat the nature, origin, limits, and possibility of the language of fiction. These texts, grouped together in 1949’s *La Part au feu* include “La Lecture de Kafka,” “Kafka et la littérature,” “Le Langage de fiction,” and perhaps Blanchot’s most famous essays, “La Littérature et le droit à la mort.” The four essays from this collection, as compared to later essays, sometimes seem like sketches of his future essays. In them, Blanchot develops many of the ideas that appear in his later essays: errancy, solitude, exigency, and the power of silence, the murmur.

37 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 62.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 63. Blanchot also notes that this trend in criticism, to replace a text with a new commentary, was in fact inaugurated by Kafka himself; he often times provided exegeses for his own texts in his diaries, letters, and while reading the texts to his friends.
Three major ideas can be taken from Blanchot’s survey of Kafka criticism. The first is that by imposing an allegorical interpretation on to Kafka’s text, critics create a situation whereby all commentary will be dissatisfying and contradictory. To claim that any element in Kafka’s fiction represents only one thing is to preclude all other readings, which leads Blanchot to echo the words of Starobinsky that “il n’y a pas de dernier mot, il ne peut pas y avoir de dernier mot.” Secondly, we can generalize that, due to the infinity of criticism, any critical approach to Kafka is necessarily false. Blanchot admits that “celui qui lit Kafka est donc forcément transformé en menteur,” but he coyly adds as an afterthought, “et pas tout à fait en menteur.” This paradox is just one of many that govern the reading and criticism of Kafka’s texts.

From Blanchot’s generalizations we can see criticism as a form of reading, as a metaphor, which is the third principle gleaned from “La Lecture de Kafka.” Faith, truth, despair, unease, and anxiety circle around the text and create sensations of perpetual movement, fluidity, and absence, like a vortex circling endlessly around an empty space. This empty space is “angoissant” not for the coexistence of different interpretations, but rather “la possibilité mystérieuse d’apparaître tantôt avec un sens négatif, tantôt avec un sens positif.” Whereas some teleological readings of Kafka see the hero of The Castle striving for salvation or God, Blanchot cautions against such readings. Instead, “toute l’œuvre de Kafka,” Blanchot states, alluding to Hegel, “est à la recherche d’une

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40 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 66. Oddly enough, Blanchot would title one later essay “Le Dernier mot de Kafka,” and another “Le Tout dernier mot de Kafka.” But this last word does not refer to a final pronouncement or verdict about Kafka, but rather Kafka’s final published works—his correspondence. The last word of Kafka was the posthumously published letters.
41 Ibid., 66.
42 Ibid., 69.
affirmation qu’elle voudrait gagner par la négation,”¹⁴³ this negation will turn creates a new affirmation until a sort of Hegelian cycle of negation spins out of control. But we must remember, there is no transcendence, no final goal, no ultimate truth, no God, not even a dead one.

The play of negativity, of the negative dialectic constantly negating itself without ever creating a final synthesis, is equated to both the desert—as described in “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre”—and death. But death is still not the end; it is only a process, a dying. It is not salvation, it is not heaven or hell, rather it is an infinite status of becoming, awaiting, expecting. It is like Kafka’s “Hunter Gracchus,” a character who falls to his death, but who lives on because the boat that was meant to carry him to the other side has lost its way. A terrible mistake was made (l’erreur) and now Gracchus is forced to wander (errer). “The Hunter Gracchus” can be seen as an allegory for Kafka’s experience, for that of the literary character, for literature itself, as well as the interpretative process. Blanchot quotes Kafka when he writes, “notre salut est la mort, mais non pas celle-ci.” We hope that death, like The Castle or like literature itself, will give us our salvation, put an end to our suffering, create a definitive truth. Instead, in a cruel paradox, even though “notre salut c’est dans la mort … l’espoir c’est vivre.”¹⁴⁴ For Kafka, writing is everything. It is more than living, more than death. It is, as Blanchot describes it, a mystery. And the attentive reader welcomes the mystery, wishes it to be preserved. Kafka’s texts, Blanchot argues, “reflètent la malaise d’une lecture qui cherche

¹⁴³ Ibid.
¹⁴⁴ Hill offers a chilling illustration of this concept in his analysis of Kafka’s famous death bed note written to his doctor: “If you do not kill me, you are a murderer.” Hill reads this small episode of Kafka’s life into Blanchot’s récit “L’Arrêt de mort” where a character, on her death bed, mutters something similar.
à conserver l’énigme et la solution … la possibilité de lire dans l’impossibilité d’interpréter cette lecture.”

The power of Kafka, in Blanchot’s writing, is not that his texts can offer truths and paths to salvation, but that they are resistant to them. Kafka’s writing is approachable, in spite of the bleakness of its content. It is readable, but somehow uninterpretable, which makes it call out again and again for more interpretation. Not literal translations, superimpositions of staid theories, or even allegorical experiments. No! Blanchot uses Kafka as an entry point into literature and language, as an entry point into the condition of the writer in general.

**Kafka et la littérature**

In “Kafka et la littérature” Blanchot once more criticizes Kafka criticism as an egregious form of l’homme et l’œuvre. He admonishes critics for situating Kafka “en dehors de sa condition d’écrivain,” so we can imagine that Blanchot’s goal is to situate Kafka as a writer. Instead of treating Kafka as the writer Kafka always wanted to be, critics, in Blanchot’s view, are more interested in analyzing him as a person—his relationship with his father, his strained relationships with women, or his unhappiness at work. As they analyze his writing, they see only what they want to see: a tortured man crushed by authority figures. Whereas Robert tries to bring the argument back to style, genre, and art, Blanchot refers to the “cas de Kafka” as a strictly literary investigation about the author. Blanchot suggest that understanding Kafka demands first of all approaching him as a writer, a man consumed by the passion to write, a man who confided to his journal that “I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing

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45 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 67.
46 Ibid., 75.
Blanchot refers to Kafka’s desperate plaint that “everything that is not literature bores me and I hate it, for it disturbs me or delays me, if only because I think it does.”

What is surprising about Kafka, Blanchot writes, is not that he devoted himself to literature to the extent that he did, but rather that Kafka—a man who doubted everything including his capacity to write, his capacity to live, and his capacity to love—never once doubted literature. He believed literature was a path to salvation. Blanchot underlines how for Kafka writing is not “une affaire d’esthétique … non pas la création d’une œuvre littéraire valable, mais son salut.” I discussed Robert’s description of Kafka’s (perhaps naïve) belief in the possibility of salvation through art, a belief he inherited from the tradition of German romanticism as well as Flaubert. Even though Blanchot is alluding to this discourse, he offers a unique expression of Kafka’s status as author.

Blanchot wants to show how Kafka’s real condition as a writer is found in his journals. His journal writing served as a sort of apprenticeship in the craft of writing. In this mode, Kafka discovered the value of “une forme parfaitement travaillée.” But the journal also reflects the writer’s solitude. In staying awake at night, in giving himself over to the demons of insomnia and solitude, Blanchot believes that Kafka was in fact giving himself over to the power of literature, a force that does not accept half-measures. “Dès l’instant qu’il écrit,” Blanchot writes, referring as much to Kafka the particular writer as he does to an abstraction of the Writer, “il est dans la littérature et il y est complètement … c’est de sa fatalité.” Kafka asks much of literature—namely salvation—

48 Ibid., 300.
49 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 76.
50 Ibid., 77. This perfectly practiced form is in reference to Flaubert, one of Kafka’s literary idols. Flaubert is an author who made no sacrifices and pursued the craft of writing as far as he could.
and Blanchot believes that Kafka received just as much from literature. Kafka believed in literature, and this belief “[l’a faite] exister—par conséquent, être littéraire et l’être jusqu’au bout.” Kafka’s (naive) faith in literature is like Abraham’s faith in God. When God asked Abraham, Blanchot reminds us, to sacrifice his son, Abraham must also be willing to sacrifice everything. For with the death of Isaac the son—the future—so comes the death of the faith. In Kafka’s case, a belief in literature and a wish to destroy his creation is in fact a willingness to destroy the one thing he believes in unquestionably. The lesson that we can draw from this passion is not to trust that literature will make us live through eternity—which belongs to the German romantic tradition—but to give oneself to the paradoxical condition of the prophet.51

Blanchot highlights that the writer is not a genius creating beautiful works out of nothing—a god or demiurge—but rather how the author is a sort of prophetic conduit. The prophet in his solitude is a sort of Blanchodian writer. He does not speak, but language speaks through him; he is a messenger, a deliverer of words that exist outside of him. The author as messenger, “n’est pas maître de ses paroles; même mauvaises, elles lui échappent.” For Kafka, the desire to have his writings burnt expresses “le désir secret de la parole,” which is “de se perdre,” but this desire is ultimately vain because “la parole n’est jamais perdue.” The messages continue to exist; they keep calling out with an impersonal cry, outside of the author despite any efforts to silence them, and this silence enforces a terrible suffering on the author: solitude.

Unlike the prophet, however, the author is responsible for a work of art, but the work of art demands for the writer to “se reposer de l’existence, à s’en dégager, à s’en

51 Gerald Bruns, in Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy, offers a gloss of Blanchot’s argument.
This withdrawal is not a renunciation of writing. Unlike Rimbaud who did abandon the art of writing, most writers who feel overwhelmed by the demands of writing, who are unable to balance the solitude of writing with the community of family and work, most writers will not give up the pen. Blanchot cleverly posits that though a writer may dream—as did Kafka and Hölderlin—of giving up, they will never dream of writing poorly. No writer, faced with despair, resigned himself to produce mediocre work. As long as writers continue to write, even if they are dissatisfied with their final product, they will continue to write. It is, in fact, this very dissatisfaction which provides the impetus for writing. Kafka, a man whose neuroses are well-catalogued, needed the counter-intuitive freedom which comes from being bound; he wrote that “It is often better to be in chains than to be free.”53 For Kafka, it was solitude which bound him and which ultimately liberated his writing, Blanchot says that “il se dissout,” in a solitude which was for him “très périlleuse.”54

Kafka was free to write, on account of his bonds, but writing itself was just as perilous as solitude. Constructing language for the purposes of the work is a great challenge. Speech is difficult, writing is difficult. Blanchot describes that for Kafka, what matters is not “la qualité des paroles, mais la possibilité de parler.” This formula recalls Levinas’ distinction between le dire (saying) and le dit (what is said); just as Levinas privileges the act of speaking more than the content of the speech, it seems that Blanchot is also reinforcing the possibility of speaking, even if it fails or is of low quality. Blanchot

52 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 79.
53 Kafka, The Trial, 207. Better has been alternately translated as safer, in fact, these are the words of his Joseph K.’s lawyer, giving advice while on his sickbed.
54 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 81.
offers more detail: the *dire* is privileged because “il semble que la littérature consiste à essayer de parler à l’instant où parler devient le plus difficile.”

Literature is born out of the menacing silence that threatens the writer. Despairing, fearing one’s capacity to write, is almost a necessary condition for any attempt to write. It is perhaps in this observation that Kafka’s confidence can be seen. It is *here* that he never doubts.

There is a silence, a void, at the heart of language, in the midst of speech, that cries out to be filled, and Blanchot believes that it is in this center, in this calling outward, that literature can be produced. Faced with impossibility, literature proves it is, in the end, possible, but only because it seems so impossible. Possibility, is, in fact, the specter of death looming as ultimate telos. “La possibilité que représente mon écriture avait pour essence de porter sa propre impossibilité,” which Blanchot further details is language’s movement or projection “vers sa mort.”

This death, or possibility, is what gives language and literature its power and Blanchot devotes much of “La littérature et le droit à la mort” to the relationship between impossibility, death, and absence to the function and existence of language. More than any other idea in Blanchot’s approach to the traits of language as presented in this essay, his approach to “douleur,” (grief or pain) deserves attention. Literature is not a consolation. We may hope for a posthumous salvation, but it is not a salve. A writer, in the Blanchodian model, does not write seeking catharsis and

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55 Ibid., 82.
56 In “La Solitude essentielle” Blanchot calls it the other hand, the hand that is not writing which has the power to silence the hand that holds the pen—a bit of an outdated metaphor, but a powerful metaphor of our purposes and we shall examine it when we arrive at that essay.
57 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 85. To Blanchot, death and possibility are linked. It is death which makes life possible. Impossibility, consequently, is what makes language (or fiction) work, without death, it cannot be possible, and so death looms around it, threatening it.
does not wish to have his inner turmoil soothed. Instead, literature “se constitue pour présenter la douleur, non pas la représenter.”

In later essays, Blanchot will evoke Beckett, but in the case of Kafka, there is no belief that writing will ease one’s suffering, but it does present suffering to the reader, reconstitute it as art, as a discourse. It is not the writer’s subjectivity which needs balm, it is literature that finds its very fecundity in the presentation of its own conditions—solitude, absence, grief. Writers do not need to justify themselves; in fact, “le ‘je suis malheureux’ n’est malheur qu’en s’épaississant dans ce monde nouveau du langage où il prend forme, s’enfonce, se perd, s’obscurcit et se perpétue.” It is perhaps the last word, perpetuate, which is the most important, recalling as it does the infinity of commentary and the need to continue on. Blanchot writes, “Dès que quelque chose est dite, quelque chose d’autre a besoin d’être dite,” and on and on, in a perpetual movement of negation—a thesis is posited, invoked, negated, and repeated. In the formula cited above, we discover the first seeds of Blanchot’s future treatment of the neutre. Crediting Claude-Edmonde Magny’s insight, Blanchot believes that it is in the impersonal movement of literature from ich to er, from je to il, from I to he/it, that literature opens itself up to interrogation, commentary, and abstractions.

This interrogation is ultimately a self-interrogation, the author doubting himself—not doubting literature, but his capacity to fulfill the demands of literature. The self-questioning, the looking at one’s self as other, is the first movement in impersonality, passivity, infinity. In the realm of literature, this process seems natural, but, in life this process is fraught with danger. Kafka is famous for the deep rift that separates his passion
for literature from his ability to live, and Blanchot refers to this condition when he describes how “Kafka ne peut s’empêcher d’écrire, mais l’écriture l’empêche de vivre: il s’interrompt, il recommence. Son effort est sans fin, comme sa passion est sans espoir…mais l’impossibilité d’en jamais finir n’est que l’impossibilité de continuer.” Kafka had to straddle a yes and a no; to choose, he believed, life or writing, possible or impossible and this tension, this ambiguity, only strengthened his art because “la littérature est le lieu des contradictions et de désaccords.” Positioned in the middle as he was, Kafka lived the classic contradictions of the artist.

The writer, devoting himself to his art, absenting himself from life, develops contempt for literature, but the object of his contempt only brings him back to literature. He cannot renounce it, and literature becomes an accomplice to that which menaces it—separation, absence, silence—“et cette menace est finalement complice à la littérature.” It is only natural, faced with so many contradictory factors, conditions, and implications, that Blanchot would ultimate define writing in contradictions. “Écrire c’est prendre en charge l’impossibilité d’écrire … écrire c’est nommer le silence, c’est d’écrire en s’empêchant d’écrire.” And these mutually exclusive conditions create a writer who is bent against himself. Literature, Blanchot concludes, bears a name: “destruction de soi-même, déségrégation infinie, et un autre nom : bonheur et infinité.” The paradox of this last statement, both limit and infinity, both disintegration and appearance, both destruction and joy—all of these alternates which separate the writer from life are addressed in “Le Langage de fiction,” another Kafka-themed text from La Part au feu.

58 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 92.
59 Ibid., 93.
Le Langage de fiction

In terms of language, Blanchot’s approach lends itself to comparisons with Structuralist and post-Structuralist traditions. Influenced though he was by Saussurian linguistics, it would be hasty to call Blanchot a Structuralist. Blanchot insists less on the arbitrary nature of sign systems than he does on a metaphorical approach, using the words absence, death, and void. Language, in the Blanchodian model, is almost a physical, material object, but not quite. It is the qualifier “but not quite” that produces the drama of Blanchot’s approach to and use of language.

Echoing many of the themes that he elaborates in “La littérature et le droit à la mort,” Blanchot creates an artificial dichotomy in the realm of language; he cleaves it into ordinary language (le langage courant) and the language of fiction, but almost immediately he recognizes the near impossibility of distinguishing one from the other. Ordinary language, that assemblage of words we use in our daily life to answer the phone, order lunch, or murmur sweet nothings, is to be distinguished from literature where, “un récit écrit dans la prose la plus simple suppose déjà dans la nature du langage un changement.”

Blanchot is suggesting a different frame of reality in regard to literary language, and he illustrates this point with Kafka.

Blanchot’s division or alternance between ordinary language and literary language is not a binary and there is no value attached to one or the other. It is not the use of a different vocabulary or the composition of a sentence that distinguishes ordinary language from fiction. It is not the structure of the grammar and it is not any lyrical, poetic, or novelistic talent. The language of fiction is distinct because of the very

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60 Blanchot, La part du feu, 79.
conditions of fiction. In ordinary language, Blanchot describes one as being “pressé de toutes part par la réalité et partout je l’atteins et la rencontre.”61 The reality that one knows can be seen in Blanchot’s quoting of Kafka’s seemingly banal phrase from The Castle, “Le chef du bureau a téléphoné.” In one’s life, were this phrase to be uttered, all of the variables would be known—who the boss is, what the office where one works is, and, most likely, how this supervisor relates to the speaker of the phrase.

In the language of fiction, this relationship is upset, for one must account for the reader’s ignorance of the inner workings of the fictional world. Blanchot elaborates that

Quelle que soit la bonne volonté réaliste de l’auteur, je ne suis pas seulement infiniment ignorant de tout ce qui se passe dans le monde qu’on m’invoque, mais cette ignorance fait partie de la nature de ce monde; du moment qu’objet d’un récit, il se présente comme un monde irréal avec lequel j’entre en contact par la lecture et non par mon pouvoir de vivre.62

In Blanchot’s description, we can extract certain principal concepts: ignorance, invocation, another world, power of living. From these key words we can reconstruct a description of many of Blanchot’s larger schemes.

Blanchot warns that even if the reader were able to penetrate the meanings of The Castle, for instance, (s)he will always remain conscious of the little that is actually known, “car cette pauvreté est l’essence de fiction qui est de me [the reader] présenter ce qui la fait irréelle, accessible à la seule, inaccessible à mon existence;—et nulle richesse d’imagination, aucune exactitude d’observaton ne saurait combler une telle indigence.”63

Because fiction is necessarily interaction with the unreal, we have only words to connect us to this other world, far from our existence, and as we engage the fictional text, we can

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 79-80.
63 Ibid., 80.
really only understand the absence of the real as a yawning void. Blanchot’s conception of language entails such gaps. Language, for Blanchot, and the words that compose it, do not replace objects but instead signal their absence. In fictional readings, we are constantly confronting gaps, voids, absences. Language is not filled, it is empty; it works because it can “éloigner de nous les choses en tenant leur place et de tenir la place des choses, non s’en remplissant, mais en s’en abstenant.”64 Thus the nature of language, its value and dignity, “est d’être aussi près que possible de rien … Tout alors est nullité.”65

The nothingness that is language is reflected in the infinite unreality of fiction. A sentence, “The head clerk from the office telephoned,” acts as a sign in The Castle, but it does not belong to our reality, it is an unknown world, it is “un ensemble imaginé qui ne peut cesser d’être irréel.”66 Hence, as Blanchot describes in “Kafka et la littérature,” the world is not represented but rather presented. The unreal, unable to be understood, tries to evoke the pathos related to characters, places, and feelings of fictional worlds, but it can only present them. A gap will always remain.

Blanchot becomes repetitive on this last point: words are phantoms, absences, silences. Fiction presents the “lumineuse opacité des choses.”67 The language of fiction and of everyday speech would appear to be identical; it is only the context in which they are used that indicates any distinction—no matter how small this distinction actually is. No matter how similar these two languages appear, the language of a récit undergoes a radical transformation because language “invite le lecteur à réaliser sur les mots eux-

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid, 81.
67 Ibid.
mêmes la compréhension de ce qui se passe dans le monde qu’on lui propose et dont toute la réalité d’être l’objet d’un récit.” So the reader, in the end, is invited to superimpose some form of understanding in the chain of absence and silence which is the fictional text that one engages. But this invitation for meaning is also stymied by the problematics of language and by the conventions of fiction and commentary.

Foreshadowing his thoughts on the infinity of commentary that he describes in “Le Pont de bois,” Blanchot concludes “Le Langage de fiction” with a description of the many ways by which the language of fiction instigates and frustrates the interpretive process. Blanchot warns “combien il est dangereux de prétendre fixer, sous une forme explicite, l’interprétation d’un récit où la négation est au travail.” Commentary is at work because of an absence, or mystery, present in the original (the presence of an absence), in the very language of fiction. Blanchot finds in the language of fiction three possible divisions or fields, and he defines allegory, myth, and symbole. Allegory, in Blanchot’s use, is the ideal of ordinary language. In allegory, the story disappears and one seeks a one-for-one correspondence between sign and ideal. Myth is where language allows one to feel the meaning of the story—less a signified meaning than a veritable presence—one does not express what one knows but rather feels what one does not. It is, however, Blanchot’s third category which he spends the most time developing.

Symbolic language, Blanchot explains, is the goal of the language of fiction. The symbole is more than one idea; it expresses the world and human existence in its entirety and is able to do this because it is not bogged down by the distractions of ordinary

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68 Ibid., 82.
69 Ibid., 88.
language. The symbolic, in this usage, tries to reconstruct “original existence” by way of fiction. If language is displaying the absence of things, then fiction seeks to present this very absence, and in this absence, the absence that constitutes it, and so on infinitely. As such, we encounter a sort of “négation perpétuellement active.” The negation at the heart of language—and the story of its own negation—overcomes any truth and meaning so as to present a “dépassement” (the story of its own overcoming); symbolic language, as Blanchot describes it, “rend sensible dans une fiction … l’effort impossible de la fiction pour se réaliser en tant que fictive.” The story of its own possibility only points to the lack of possibility which is its foundation: a récit of negation.

It is this significance which energizes the symbolic—the movement is not a truth, it overcomes any truth or sens and presents this very overcoming; it “rend sensible d’une fiction … l’effort impossible de la fiction pour se réaliser en tant que fictive.” It becomes the story, in the abstract, of its own possibility but also points to a gap between its possibility and the insufficiency of language. It is how “le passage du oui au non, du non au oui, est ici la règle et toute interprétation qui s’y dérobe … contredit le mouvement qui le rend possible.” When a commentary attempts to fix meaning, that commentary is also lacking, “il faut donc replonger l’interprétation au sein du récit.” Blanchot elaborates, “en ce sens, tout symbole qui ne ruine pas l’ouvrage où il se développe, se ruine dans les commentaires qu’il ne peut s’empêcher de provoquer.” This paradox of commentary in relation to the work, recalling “Le Pont de bois,” is an excellent indication of the

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70 Ibid., 84.  
71 Ibid., 85.  
72 Ibid., 88.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid., 89.
ambiguity of language, and the simultaneously dependent and independent nature of criticism—criticism exists to comment on a book, but it only repeats what was said, sending one back to the original, but at the same time it comes into existence as a work itself, calling out for commentary of itself.

Blanchot sees death as the culmination of this effort, but not death as transcendence (a popular reading of _The Castle_), but rather, death as a metaphor. It is like the “Hunter Gracchus,” or being buried alive. Death arrives, but this death is not deliverance. One remains conscious to experience one’s own death for eternity—one dies to survive one’s death—a living death, a posthumous life.75

**La Littérature et le droit à la mort**

The Last essay included in _La Part au feu_ is “La littérature et le droit à la mort” (1947).76 Blanchot begins this long essay by asking the reader when does literature begin? How does it happen? He answers that literature begins when literature itself becomes a question. The act of questioning is itself a self-questioning, questions that are addressed to oneself and to language. This process is treated as a marvel by Blanchot, as if he believes the act of writing and literatures truly were miraculous achievements. At first, you are not a writer, he writes; now, by the very act of writing, you have become a writer. This transformation can never be undone, “tu es condamné à l’ineffaceable.”77 But the work still awaits a reader. It is here that Blanchot refers to Kafka and his process of

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75 At this point, we may be reminded of Cixous’ vampire image.
76 Curiously, it is this essay that opens _De Kafka à Kafka_. What is more, it seems tangential to Blanchot’s use and understanding of Kafka. This essay is a sort of historico-ontological approach to literature, treating language, death, the revolution and the terror, Hegel, and the discourse of engagement. Because this essay is so important to Blanchot’s writing, it cannot be ignored. At the same time, however, because it only marginally treats Kafka, it should, in the scope of this chapter, be covered briefly.
77 Blanchot, _La Part du feu_, 293.
becoming an author. In a rhetorical flourish, Blanchot says that the writer passes from the night of possibility to the day of presence, in invoking the Hegelian notion of day,

Blanchot is creating a metaphor of the movement from œuvre to “œuvre des autres,” when it is read. Regardless of the variables at work and the future readership that remains to gaze upon and “complete” the work, literature itself remains a fundamental question, something that “se cherche.”

This preliminary incursion into the work is only a first step, but a step that cannot be undone. The written work, once in existence, is beyond judgment. “Ce qui est écrit n’est bien écrit ni mal écrit, ni important ni vain, ni mémorable ni digne d’oubli.” It quite simply is. Blanchot establishes literature in such basic terms partially in response to Kafka’s mad desire to be a writer himself. Blanchot would reassure Kafka that he is a writer simply by having written. Sidestepping the Sartrean interrogation into “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” Blanchot defines the writer, not the work. A writer exists once he has written; the work, which is infinitely disputable, exists when it is read.

From this hesitant outline of the writer’s existence (or coming into being), Blanchot returns to his ideas presented in “Le Langage de fiction.” When the writer writes and creates, literature embodies “la tromperie et la mystification,” which are “non seulement inévitables, mais forment l’honnêteté de l’écrivain.” From “la maladie des

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78 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 16.
80 Ibid., 297.
81 In a digression that appears either in this essay or another Blanchot goes further to say that a writer cannot read his own work, it requires different eyes from a different point of existence. Furthermore, he is not seeking to define art, necessarily. Whereas Blanchot refers to Hegel’s formulation of art as being the spirit underlying the creation of a work, Blanchot seems more interested in defining the moment literature is, instead of what it is and any notions of value that could be attached to it.
mots,” Blanchot encourages that we find “la santé des mots.” Alluding to the mid-century malaise of language’s (in)ability to convey meaning reliably, Blanchot suggests that it is this sickness inherent to language which aids in the pursuit of literature. The emptiness that words signal (the absence of objects), is in fact, their meaning (sens).83

Even if words are absence, literature “n’est pas rien;” it is something.84 It is an object—ink, paper, binding—it is more concrete than immaterial thought, but it is also less immediately immanent than action (the Sartrean discourse of engagement). Blanchot asks, “Que fait l’écrivain qui écrit?” The answer is that he creates something (the work) by unsettling language. The writer believes himself to be the master of everything, but he is less master than he is slave, a slave to language and a slave to the process of writing.

Blanchot returns this discussion to his fundamental view of language as something undermined by an absence of referents. To say “chat” is to make a “non-chat.”86 The non-object, the “non-chat” that is evoked by saying “chat,” is, in fact, literary language. It is made “d’inquiétude ... de contradictions. Sa position est peu stable et peu solide.”87 This instability allows for the interpretive process. It is not a quest to fix the fluidity of language, to fix meaning, but rather part of the fluidity itself—it is a wandering inside the spaces and the silences of the work. It is what Blanchot calls ambiguity.

Ambiguity can be understood as the coexistence of mutually exclusive elements: both true and false, both yes and no, both transcendent and immanent. These

82 Blanchot, La Part du feu, 302.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., 304.
85 Blanchot refers to Hegel and his notions of work, objects, and actions. He equates writers to artisans who craft objects; for Blanchot, the book is an object—at first, nothing existed and then something did.
86 Blanchot, La Part du feu, 312-314.
87 Ibid., 313.
contradictions, paradoxes, aporia are constant themes in the work of Blanchot and, before him, it seems that Kafka fictionalized and lived these very ambiguities. To be sure, Blanchot believes that ambiguity can enter into ordinary language, but that literature is ambiguity. In ordinary language, the ambiguity of language would present itself as a sort of duality: “did she mean this or that?!” But in literature there is no binary, the variations seem to multiply until the number verges on the infinite. It is in this infinite movement that criticism appears and is at work.

There are several more conditions present, Blanchot writes. A writer feels this ambiguity as interiority and seeks to project it outward, to express it by writing—but writing does not alleviate the ambiguity, if anything, it prolongs it. In the process of writing, the author “se supprime dans l’œuvre.”88 This concept appears to conform to the romantic ideal of the tortured artist, but it stops short. The reason is to be found in both death and ambiguity. For the romantic, art purges the artist; one is cleansed by one’s struggles, by the ordeal of creation, and by the salvation of death. Death is a liberating movement, transcendence, peace. No such offering is found in the work of Kafka or the treatment of his writing by Blanchot. Even if language carries within itself its own death (language as absence, language as death)89 this death is not a final death but instead “l’erreur de l’ancienne mort,”90 where erreur is to be understood as errancy and fault.

Blanchot returns again to “The Hunter Gracchus.” In this case, Gracchus serves as a metaphor for words, language, literature, and criticism. Each one of them become

88 Ibid., 327.
89 This is related to the Reign of Terror, the suppression of the individual during the Terror and the sovereign’s ability, by naming the subject, to destroy the subject.
90 Blanchot, La Part du feu, 325.
posthumous, dead but outliving their life: words as the phantom of objects; language as the rhetorical expression of the solitude which symbolizes the writer’s living death;\textsuperscript{91} literature as the projection towards silence and death; and criticism as the posthumous speaking of the work, which becomes a work in its own right, needing further interpretation. All of these concepts exhibit, like Gracchus, a death that survives its own death. They exist in a space that is neither dead nor alive. It is ambiguity. It is the art of Kafka, his ambiguity. Perhaps deliberately frustrating the reader, Blanchot asks, rhetorically, “why is there ambiguity?” He answers, rhetorically, “l’ambiguïté est sa proper réponse.”\textsuperscript{92} Frustrating, yes, but also enlightening. We see in “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” not only a summary of the major motifs related to Kafka in \textit{La Part au feu}, such as language, criticism, absence, and infinity, but we find the nascent forms of future concepts which appear in \textit{L’Espace littéraire} and \textit{L’Entretien infini}—solitude, errancy, and within Blanchot’s approach to ambiguity, we see the foundation of the equally ambiguous voice of the \textit{neutre}.\textsuperscript{93}

\textbf{Solitude and Contradictions in the Writing Process}

In \textit{L’Espace littéraire}, we notice a slight shift in perspective from Blanchot’s earliest writings on Kafka from overt concerns about language, criticism, and the modes of fiction\textsuperscript{94} to a more sustained discussion of the conditions under which the writer exists as well as the attributes of the work. As \textit{L’Espace littéraire} unfolds, we notice more

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Explained through the metaphor of Lazarus and the ‘other night’ in several essays in \textit{L’Espace littéraire}.}
\footnote{Blanchot, \textit{La part du feu}, 328.}
\footnote{I will write Blanchot’s \textit{neutre} in French and italics to distinguish it from the more commonly used word \textit{neuter} and further to distinguish his use of this term from Robert’s, which we explored in an earlier Chapter.}
\footnote{Allegory, for instance}
\end{footnotes}
interaction with Kafka’s diaries as well as the foundation being laid for his further explorations regarding the *neutre*.

The opening chapters of *L’Espace littéraire* offer a framework for many of the themes that this collection of essays will entertain. The most important single term we might discover in these essays is ‘solitude,’ which can be personal, mystical, or metaphysical. Solitude, for Blanchot, is not a *recueillement* as was the case for Rilke and Rousseau but rather a wound. The solitude of the work, if not a personally chosen or society inflicted separation, presents one of the ultimate paradoxes of Blanchot’s notion of literature and the author. “Celui qui écrit l’œuvre,” Blanchot begins, “est mis à part, celui qui l’a écrite est congédié,” but this “discharge” has no active subject aside from the work. The work, for Blanchot “n’est ni achevé ni inachevé: elle est” That is the only thing that the work says, “qu’elle est.” The being of the work, its essence, calls for those whose lives depend on it to “[appartenir] à la solitude de ce qui n’exprime que le mot être” This type of solitude—a unique one-on-one relation with the work—is passed to the reader who, like the writer, confronts the “risque de cette solitude.”

Solitude, in Blanchot’s idiom, is embroiled in a perplexing quest for its own origin. It seeks to become a work of art, but it is also defined by the sterility of the words that compose it. In practical terms, this means that a book is never finished—a gap, silence, or absence always remains inside the work, even if it is wholly unattribuable. Blanchot states that the writer is necessarily aware of the incompletion of a work but “ce

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96 Ibid., 14.
97 Ibid., 15.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
qui veut terminer à lui seul, rester interminable, l’associe à un travail illusoire.”

The book can only say that it is, can only come into full existence when it is completed but it is never completed because there is something more to be said; we can thus call this absence in the book ‘that which remains to be said—unsaid, it will remain unsaid.’ Blanchot is silently alluding to Paul Valéry’s maxim that a poem is never finished, it is only abandoned, and overtly alluding to Kafka’s unfinished novels.

Blanchot offers a hypothetical case as to when the work could be finished: when the author dies. Blanchot quickly reverses this statement against itself, claiming that the author dies metaphorically when the work exists. This second statement, perhaps rhetorical, does have a concrete rationale. The work cannot be amended; the author of the singular work cannot alter a finished work, he can only begin a new one, thus the writer lives these eternal beginnings, dying a figurative death each time he abandons a so-called finished work. Two forms of beginnings come into existence: the first is when a writer who is not a writer sits to write, makes a mark and becomes a writer: the second is a sort of rhetorical beginning when the work is finished and one must begin anew. We will see a modified form of this beginning in Dans le labyrinthe when the writer in the story says “non” and is forced to begin again in his descriptions and storytelling.

The eternal beginning, however, is threatened by a powerful force. Though the writer seems master of his fictive world, he is, in fact, a sort of slave. The mastery of the writer is wholly subverted by the hand that does not write; it is the power of the other hand to interrupt the writer that is the hidden force of writing. Threatened with silence

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100 Ibid., 16.
101 The idea of mastery was first introduced in “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” and reworked in “Le Langage de fiction.”
with every thrust, the writer continues on in the face of this threat. Blanchot calls the work of the writer “l’interminable, l’incessant,” and this condition creates the solitude at the heart of the work: “écrire est maintenant l’interminable, l’incessant.” Writing becomes a form of infinity, which reflects the endless \textit{différence} of textual meaning and the endless repetition of commentary. From the writer’s supposed mastery of meaning, Blanchot derives the writer’s inability to express exactitude and certainty, which is later echoed in commentary. Worse, the writer must confront the dread that “tout a été dit.” Threatened with silence by the other hand and intimidated by the fear that everything has been said, the writer confronts “la dignité du silence.” Blanchot suggests that the writer, as unique subjectivity, is removed, in a way, from this equation. Once the writer makes the effort to write, his or her relationship to silence, dread, and even the self are ruptured.

“Ecrire,” Blanchot explains, “c’est briser le lien qui unit la parole à moi-même ... car elle interpelle, elle est l’interpellation qui commence en moi parce qu’elle finit en toi. Ecrire, c’est rompre ce lien.” The writer is separated from his self and writing becomes a calling outwards toward the Other, “you.” Writing is interminable, Blanchot repeats, and he insists on the fact that it was Kafka who “remarque, avec surprise, avec un plaisir

\textit{103} Ibid.
\textit{104} In “Returning to the Subject,” Karlis Racevskis describes how the fear that everything has been said is not only a postmodern concern, but something that dates to La Bruyère who “famously stated at the close of the seventeenth century that it was no use trying to come up with new ideas since everything had already been said. More recently,” Racevskis continues, “Jean-Luc Nancy has taken up La Bruyère’s phrase and given it a new twist. Yes, he admits, everything has been said, ‘but everything is still to be said, because the whole as such needs always to be said anew’ (\textit{Etre singulier pluriel}, 112).” (Racevskis, Karlis, “Returning to the Subject,” \textit{Works and Days} 49/50 (2007), 85). We may further note that Louis-René des Forêts, a subject of Blanchot’s critical attention, begins his fragmented text \textit{Pas à pas jusqu’au dernier} by echoing the same sentiment that Blanchot and Nancy evoke to re-tell or to re-say: “Dire et redire encore, redire autant de fois que la redite s’impose, tel est notre devoir qui use le meilleur de nos forces en ne prendra fin qu’avec elles” (Des Forêts, Louis-René, \textit{Pas à pas jusqu’au dernier} (Paris: Mercure de France, 2001), 7).
enchânté, qu’il est entré dans la littérature dès qu’il a pu substituer le ‘Il’ au ‘Je’.”

When the writer renounces saying “I,” “l’écrivain appartient à un langage que personne ne parle, qui ne s’adresse à personne, qui n’a pas de centre, qui ne révèle rien.” This chain of negations reflects the neutre voice. Language is what speaks, but it says nothing. It reveals nothing, only telling of its absence of revelation. What is being expressed is “l’être.” And when being “speaks,” it gives itself over to the interminable nature of the writing project. “Quand écrire, c’est se livrer à l’interminable, l’écrivain qui accepte d’en soutenir l’essence, perd le pouvoir de dire ‘Je’.”

Losing the power to say ‘I’ is not losing the power to speak, per se. Instead it allows for the echo of being to resound through the work. By imposing a subjective silence in the work, a murmur still escapes. We might equate this to the way that language, while negating an object still allows for the absence of this object to echo through. The writer, renouncing the power to say I, producing a silence, is in effect maintaining “l’affirmation autoritaire, quoique silencieuse.” By silencing the self, the writer is giving voice to truths which cannot otherwise be expressed, universal truths, or a “vérité qui est au-delà de la personne et voudrait être au-delà du temps.” This truth from beyond may be considered a mystical revelation or something other worldly, but we might suggest that once the writer’s life and private fears have been silenced, a more universal expression may be allowed to shine forth. “Ce qui parle en lui, c’est ce fait que, d’une manière ou d’une autre, il n’est plus lui-même,” which, like the prophet who

106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 23.
109 Ibid.
allows language to speak through him, the writer, no longer ‘saying’ expresses a message far beyond him. This message is not delivered by je but by il, paradoxically “‘Il,’ c’est moi-même devenu personne, autrui devenu autre, c’est que, là où je suis, je ne puisse plus m’adresser à moi et que celui qui s’adresse à moi, ne dis pas ‘Je,’ ne soit pas lui-même.” This process, antithetical to the self in its traditional nature, is in fact solitude speaking, bringing forth the neutre.

The neutrality that Blanchot evokes, the threat of silence that looms over the work, will only be elaborated upon ten years later in the essays of L’Entretien infini. For now, we must confront the solitude of the writer. The writer is a worker (of sorts) who sits in solitude and is confronted with an even deeper solitude, the inability to say I, the subject has been lost. But this paradoxical loss is what gives form to the writer’s voice: “Là où il ne parle pas, déjà il parle; quand il cesse, il persévère.” Who or what is il? Is it “he,” a subjectivity or “it” a radical impersonality? How are we to makes sense of these mutually exclusive conditions, speaking by not speaking, ceasing only to carry on? In reference to the power of the hand that does not write, we might make sense of what Blanchot means when he muses “quand la neutralité parle, seul celui qui lui impose silence prépare les conditions de l’entente.”110 But the threat of being silenced is, almost paradoxically, a “besoin d’écrire.”111 It is as if the writer, knowing and fearing that forgetfulness and silence await the work, feels a still greater urgency to write. In the face of a looming silence, we shout louder. When a death sentence has been imposed, we cling

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110 Ibid., 56.
111 Ibid.
to life with an even firmer grip. But the silence that can be exercised over the work is not just “the other hand,” it is also “le monde,”—society, work, family, life.

“Le Cas de Kafka est trouble et complexe.”

In the first forty pages of this chapter, we find a blueprint to enter the density of one of Blanchot’s most sustained essays on Kafka, “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre.” This essay is unique in that it is perhaps the first and clearly longest analysis of Kafka’s diaries. Blanchot is not seeking to explain Kafka’s work, not seeking a final explanation for his fiction, and he is not offering a biographical or psychological accounting of the man. By commenting on the diary entries, he is not endeavoring to know Kafka or anything else. Instead, this essay, like the others we noted, is about Kafka’s condition in particular and the writer’s condition at large. Blanchot establishes a chronology and outlines Kafka’s life as a writer, not to show how Kafka developed, progressed or came into his own, but to survey the shifting conditions he encountered as an artist in the making. What does Kafka’s writing mean? What does the fact that Kafka wrote mean? What does writing mean? What does it mean to write?

In “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” Blanchot positions writing as a question, and he rephrases that same inquiry to introduce “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre.” Writing is performed in “la mode interrogative.” It is not a cathartic push, Blanchot claims; nobody can write “« je suis désespéré », mais « tu es désespéré »?” nobody can affirm ‘j’écris’ but only wonder ‘écris-tu?’ The fundamental nature of the question

\[112\] Ibid., 63.
\[113\] Ibid.
allows for writing, for literature, to exist. It would seem that the writer is seeking an affirmation even though mired in interrogative groping.

Full of passion for and about literature, Kafka wanted literature to be his salvation, his catharsis, his saving grace, but literature is not “un moyen,” a means to an end, and so Kafka became further involved in obscure conflicts—freedom versus bondage, life versus art, salvation versus suffering. Literature becomes, perhaps cruelly, the expression of the conflict but never the resolution to the conflict. Having studied Kafka’s fiction and journals, Blanchot concludes that until September 22, 1912 Kafka was not wholly devoted to literature. It was on this autumn night that he wrote “The Judgment.” This night he discovered that he could write, that he was, having written, a writer. From this night on, his conflict became the centerpiece of his life as an artist and as a man—he became the conflict. The conditions of his status as a writer were simple: time is not enough to satisfy the demands of writing, one must “passer dans un autre temps.” Fascination, solitude, lost time, and the loss of the self, these are the attributes and the space of the writer, there is no je, the il reigns. But the immediate conflicts of time and distraction were constantly present in Kafka’s life. “Il faudrait à Kafka plus de temps mais il lui faudrait aussi moins du monde.” To write, the writer needs time, space, and concentration and yet to write requires an awful solitude which creates a need

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114 The famous writing of “The Judgment” was done in one long sitting. This story relates the drama of a son sentenced to death by a brutal, bed-ridden father. This text is alternately titled “The Verdict.” It was on this September night that Kafka wrote the entirety of “The Judgment,” a process he equated with birth, especially the visceral, bloody, physiological elements of the birthing process.
115 Blanchot, L’Espace littéraire, 67.
116 Ibid., 68.
to call back to the world for companionship and warmth. Lost between these two worlds, conflicted, the writer seems to satisfy neither.

Kafka’s broken engagements are glossed by Blanchot but instead of choosing the precedents of Hölderlein and Kierkegaard he returns to Abraham and Isaac. In the case of Kierkegaard’s broken nuptials, renunciation seemed to strengthen (even perfect) his religious goals, whereas for Kafka, it stood in the way. Kafka wanted a family, a future (child), a normal life. By abandoning a wife, he abandoned the possibility of having a child, and thus abandoned the future. To Abraham, Isaac represents the future; he will carry on the laws and rituals devoted to God. With his demise, so too will die God because “l’au-delà, c’est Isaac.” For Kafka, “l’au-delà” is his family. But it is also his writing. It is both and as such, it is neither. In choosing writing, Kafka chose to destroy the future of his name but to preserve the future of his imagination.

This condition, as Blanchot frames it and as Kafka lived it, is fraught with despair, and from this despair a contradictory hope springs forth—the possibility of the greatest creation. Blanchot describes this hope that the work is a “salut” both psychological and spiritual rather than naïve. Blanchot switches the focus from writing as

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117 Ibid., 69.
118 We see the real tension and drama of Kafka’s predicament. If writing is solitude and a family imposes on the solitude, then Kafka must choose, and choose he did: literature. He broke all his engagements from this period. But again, this choice had terrible consequences because it is “la dissimulation de l’oubli de la loi.” The law of family commanded him to marry and raise a family, to lead a respectable life. This renunciation (the law and its infraction) had a profound effect on Kafka, especially having given up on a family which his father never ceased to force him into. When he was unable to write, or did not write at all, he felt even worse. Blanchot describes how “quand il n’écrit pas, Kafka est non seulement seul…mais d’une solitude stérile, froide … qu’il appelle l’hébétude.” Faced with this lethargy, Kafka the artist sought salvation though his art. He asks, Blanchot informs us, that the work save him. In dissolving himself into his work, in exiting the world that we recognize as the world, Kafka discovered “le centre de gravité de l’exigence d’écrire…là où il se sent détruit jusqu’au fond nait la profondeur qui subsiste à la destruction de la possibilité de la création la plus grande” (Ibid., 68-70).
a prophetic calling into a simpler hope that it will keep him from “sombrer” in despair.¹¹⁹

These changes and evolutions in Kafka’s relationship to the work are approached chronologically by Blanchot. He mentions the war and the year 1916 as particularly noteworthy. In 1916, Kafka thought he would join the war as a soldier or become a Zionist (even moving to Palestine) but never thought of renouncing literature (similarly to Rimbaud) seriously as an option. It seems as though Kafka defined himself by literature and was faithfully devoted to this art. In 1922 there was another period of hobby hunting¹²⁰ but literature maintained its stranglehold on his psyche. But in 1922, while completing *The Castle*, Kafka claimed to feel banished definitively from the real world. Blanchot confirms that “il est peut-être déjà citoyen d’un autre monde.”¹²¹ This other world (as has been noted) is another place where he must fight both himself and the other world. Banished into a desert, he fights the desert, himself, and the former world which banished him. As a citizen of this other world, Blanchot writes, it would seem that nothing other than literature could ever satisfy him.¹²²

The journal, on which Blanchot is relying evermore, is full of Kafka’s inner turmoil between responsibility (work, family, society) and guilt. Blanchot senses Kafka’s loneliness and notes how, having chosen literature, Kafka has also chosen all that literature demands, namely that it “exige la solitude, mais est aussi anéanti par elle.” To pursue any art, but especially writing, one needs solitude, not only to produce the work but to allow for the imaginative process to unfold. But the writer, exiled to solitude, longs

ⁱ¹⁹ Ibid., 71.
ⁱ²⁰ Kafka’s hobbies included the violin, gardening, the Yiddish theatre, and learning Hebrew.
ⁱ²¹ Ibid., 73.
ⁱ²² Satisfied or not, Kafka cannot, will not, does not even try to doubt literature. Kafka doubts himself and his powers to write (well) but “ce fait qu’écrire n’est jamais un pouvoir dont on dispose” (Ibid., 76).
for society, friendship, romance, and sex. The work, austere, harsh, cruel, as Blanchot establishes it, can only truly exist through a ritualized separation, and solitude. When this work is finished it is, or could be, the expression of an essence which otherwise could not speak. The writer, through solitude, silence, and the renunciation of himself, has allowed for something to speak which would otherwise never have existed.

**Kafka’s Error: To err, to wander**

If art just *is* then it needs no definition, no defense, no justification, and yet Blanchot undertakes a lengthy discussion—even a polemic—on this very subject. Blanchot wonders how Kafka can have such confidence in art while simultaneously doubting everything else. Everything. This confidence exists, at least according to Kafka’s romantic-like esteem for art, because “écrire, c’est conjurer les esprits, c’est peut-être les libérer contre nous, mais ce danger appartient à l’essence de la puissance qui libère.”

Writing will abolish the demons that torture the writer; it will perhaps even compensate one for the terrible effect exercised by solitude. Freeing the demons, however, only prolongs the punishment, for they are liberated against the writer. And yet, all of this is part of the risk that comes with seeking freedom. Freedom is only a more positive spin on the word exile, it is really a banishment because “il [Kafka or the writer] s’est trouvé jeté hors du monde, condamné à une solitude dont il n’avait donc pas à rendre la littérature responsable, mais plutôt à la remercier.”

Blanchot is in fact repeating the observation he made earlier in “La Littérature et le droit à la mort” where literature and what menaces literature are in league with one another. Solitude and

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123 Ibid., 87.
124 Ibid., 88.
freedom are allied. Suffering and overcoming (or at least producing some “thing” from this suffering) are coconspirators. We realize, as Blanchot’s argument unfolds, that there is no romantic transcendence, there is no compensation; there is no catharsis.

“L’art,” Blanchot avers, “est d’abord la conscience de malheur, non pas sa compensation.”\textsuperscript{125} Phrased differently, we can say that literature is not a balm for suffering but rather it is only an expression of it. We can further expound on Blanchot’s use of the word \textit{malheur}, which I have chosen to call suffering, but which is also evil, negation, harm, the bad. Malheur can come in the form of a terrible injustice inflicted on the writer by family, society, or his dissertation committee. It is also simply the condition of writing, the solitude, the wandering, the constant error, the constant search for a truth. The truth, Blanchot muses, is not written nor known, it cannot even know itself. Kafka’s truth is not our truth, it is only the expression of his separation from the truth. “Il décrit la situation de celui qui s’est perdu lui-même, qui ne peut plus dire ‘moi.’”\textsuperscript{126} Being lost, separated from the world, cast into the desert, he is simultaneously and irreparably separated from himself, and loses the capacity to say I.

We see in Blanchot’s staging of this condition an important evolutionary step toward the \textit{neutre}. Blanchot interrupts his argument to recall Kafka’s personal life: he is separated from the human community, he has cancelled his engagement and, in opting for solitude, “il appartient à l’autre rive.”\textsuperscript{127} He no longer belongs to this world but to another world, a sort of “au-delà.” He is \textit{there}, but where, Blanchot asks, is this \textit{là-bas}? He

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 91.
answers his own question by simply designating it as “loin d’ici.”

But far from here simply means “not here,” excluded from everywhere that ‘here’ could indicate. Here as space, place, and subjectivity, “exclu comme on y est exclu de soi-même,” Blanchot writes. But exclusion from here also means one is banished to there, lost, forced to “errer sans fin, d’aller jusqu’au bout de l’erreur … de transformer ce qui est un cheminement sans but dans la certitude du but sans chemin.” The desert to which Blanchot refers is the locus of exile and of wandering; there exists in being lost in the desert a certainty that there is a place to which one could return, if only one knew the route. One is certain, in the abstract situation that Blanchot is describing, that, as a necessary condition of one’s exile “là-bas,” there is an “ici,” which it is possible to regain. The goal is not lost, only the way to carry out the goal has been lost or remains unknown.

We may surmise that for the writer, literature remains the goal; the achevement of the work remains the unquestioned objective but there is no certainty as to how one could achever this work. There is no blueprint, no map, no guiding principle. Only errer. Only to write, to wander, to live in error. This is the certainty: one is sure that one is wrong, that one is lost. One is certain that one is wholly uncertain, that one is far from certainty, that one is, rhetorically, in the desert. We see Blanchot reiterate the multifarious nature of this exile, of this outside-ness; it is not just far from a physical location, but one is far from one’s own subjectivity, from one’s own self; “il n’est pas chez lui,” the writer is “hors de lui; dans le dehors même.” This condition is a necessity, an exigency, which

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128 Ibid., 92.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
Blanchot reinforces with rhetoric: “Il faut errer.” In reference to *The Trial*, Blanchot writes that the trial itself is not the truth but rather, punning on the French and German word *Trial* (procès / Prozess), he calls it “un processus d’erreur,” this “erreur” is both the wandering of the character and what he calls “la faute essentielle.” The mobile nature of the character is seen in the Land Surveyor who is “toujours en mouvement,” and we recognize his mistakes because he “tombe sans cesse dans la faute que Kafka désigne comme la plus grave, celle de l’impatience.” The Kafkaesque sin of impatience that Blanchot evokes echoes the criticism of Vialette, Carrouge, Rougement and Robert, all of whom have described Kafka’s abhorrence of impatience as perhaps the most reliable “lesson” to be found in Kafka’s writing. We will see how impatience factors into Blanchot’s own fiction in *Aminadab*.

Specifically in *The Castle*, Blanchot sees impatience as a fundamental fault because it displays the character’s arrogance to think that the goal is close when in reality the goals is not only unthinkably distant, but the means to find the goal are unknowable. From the example of K., Blanchot constructs the following rule concerning this situation, “c’est l’impatience qui rend le terme inaccessible en lui substituent la proximité d’une figure intermédiaire. C’est l’impatience qui détruit l’approche du terme en empêchant de reconnaître dans l’intermédiaire la figure de l’immédiat.” Impatience is damning because it arrogantly assumes the nearness of a goal which is distant while at the same

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132 Ibid., 93. In this case Blanchot uses Joseph K. as a counter-example in contradistinction to K. Joseph K. never fully gives himself over to the exile. He still lives in the world, he fights the Case within the rules of “this world.” K., by leaving behind his family and name has entered “the other world” as an exile and as a subject for which the ambiguities of the verb “errer” can fully be appreciated.

133 Ibid., 94.

134 Ibid., 95.

135 Ibid., 96.
time actually pushing the goal, which could in fact become closer, still further away and
only further cementing the character’s exile—further and further into the harsh desert.

The character who “erre” is in fact prolonging his peregrinations, he is, however
“obligé de se faire de l’erreur un moyen de vérité et de ce qui le trompe indéfiniment la
possibilité ultime de saisir l’infini.”\textsuperscript{136} Truth in the face of illusion and falsehood is his
only hope and Blanchot cleverly returns this slim hope to Kafka the writer. Kafka could
never finish his texts; he was forced to wander without a goal. It is often commented that
the entirety of Kafka’s fiction is contained in the first sentence, but Kafka was driven to
pursue his premises in all directions which becomes an impossible goal, ending in the
abandonment of the work. Kafka himself lacks the patience to finish a work which
requires patience beyond what anyone would sanely consider possible. Blanchot believes,
even if incoherently, paradoxically, or coincidentally, that Kafka “a profondément
éprouvé qu’écrire, c’est se livrer à l’incessant et par angoisse, angoisse de l’impatience,
souci scrupuleux de l’exigence d’écrire ;”\textsuperscript{137} but he refused. He refused to impossibly see
these works out to the end and it was this refusal which allows for the works to stand as
they do, in a paradoxical state of completion. He imposed a limit on the limitless simply
by, out of impatience, or lack of time, or sickness, being unable to finish them. Blanchot
explains this paradox brilliantly. If, as we have argued, Kafka and the writer in general is
condemned to exclusion

\begin{quote}
Condamné est le mot juste, car si la patience, l’exactitude, la froide
maîtrise sont les qualités indispensables pour éviter de se perdre quand
plus rien ne subsiste à quoi l’on puisse se retenir, patience, exactitude,
froide maîtrise sont aussi les défauts qui, divisant les difficultés et les
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 98.
étendant indéfiniment, retardent sûrement la délivrance, sans cesse transforment l’infini en l’indéfini, de même que c’est aussi la mesure qui dans l’œuvre empêche que l’illimité jamais ne s’accomplisse.\textsuperscript{138}

Blanchot is using Kafka as a paradigm for the writer in general. By observing these tensions between the limited and the limitless, between patience and impatience, Blanchot is once more evoking the tension in Kafka’s life between life and art, between family and solitude, and between Kafka and Kafka,\textsuperscript{139} between the self and the other.

Blanchot’s treatment of Kafka indicates how Kafka may have been a dramatic, tortured, tragic case, but his case is, in one way or another, relatable to anyone who endeavors to write. One must figuratively enter the desert. One must assume the frightening ordeal of losing “soi-même.” One must, under these exigencies, renounce the right to say \textit{je} in favor of \textit{il}. We see in these conditions the framework of Blanchot’s notion of neutrality which we will encounter in two essays from \textit{L’Entretien infini} (1964).

\textbf{Narrative Voices}

Blanchot begins his essay “La Voix narrative: (le « il », le neutre)” with a seemingly banal statement: “J’écris,” he suggests, the following sentence: “‘les forces de la vie ne suffisent que jusqu’à un certain point.’” Leslie Hill, in his article “A Kind of Struggle: Blanchot, Kafka, the \textit{Neutre},” informs us that this phrase, never properly identified by Blanchot, in fact comes from \textit{The Castle}. Though Hill, Paul Davies, Anne Banfield, and David Ellison all offer thorough readings of the article in question, they do not endeavor to contextualize it in relation to Blanchot’s wider writings on Kafka.\textsuperscript{140} Hill

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{139} It is notable that Carrouge’s biographical study on Kafka was titled \textit{Kafka versus Kafka}.
\textsuperscript{140} Davies comes closest, but he ultimately chooses to focus his article on the Kafka-themed fragments from \textit{L’Écriture du désastre}.
and Davies come closest. Hill chooses to examine the *neutre* in light of Blanchot’s *récit L’Arrêt de mort*. Paul Davies, on the other hand, criticizes many of Blanchot’s assumptions that Kafka teaches us something about the *neutre*, his argument, though taking into account some of the essays from *De Kafka à Kafka*, seems to claim that the phrase “Kafka teaches us something” is highly dubious. Banfield’s article situates the *neutre* into a Cartesian discourse of self, subjectivity, and *cogito*.

Lastly, David Ellison explains the *neutre* in relation to Kafka’s short stories.

Let us return to the phrase that serves as Blanchot’s catalyst in this article: “Les forces de la vie ne suffisent que jusqu’à un certain point.” This thought, aphoristic in its brevity, like a maxim in its hinting at a universal truth, is not explained by Blanchot. He does not offer an exegesis, instead he lets the phrase remain on the page as an act or illustration for one more reflection on the nature of language and storytelling (*raconter*). Like the form of *L’Entretien infini*, and like *The Castle*, this thought is only a fragment, a dot, a pinpoint that suggests a larger whole but does not confirm the larger whole. A fragment is not complete, nor is the larger whole composed of fragments, and we must once more confront Blanchot’s treatment of completion and limits. Blanchot explains that this phrase illustrates “la limite qu’indique la fatigue limite la vie,” but at the same time the language of fiction “modifie la situation.”

In discussing the limits of life (death/possibility) and the limits of language (infinity/impossibility), Blanchot describes how meaning and any attempt to limit these limits both affirm and contradict the limitation of meaning. We might draw the analogy of commentary; it seeks to fix meaning but only

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141 This theme will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.
142 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 171.
signals either a repetition of the work’s original message or one small point in an endless
chain of possible meanings. In attempting to fix meaning, it in fact illustrates the
limitlessness of the same. Hill concludes his study and glosses Blanchot’s serpentine
language of self-cancelling conditions to explain:

Every text, even if it appears completed, is already a fragment, and
belongs to no totality, past present, or future; every text therefore is
irreducibly citational, drawn from a book that is the Book of culture, but
always already put apart from any such Book, placed at a distance from
itself, no longer rooted in the self-presence of original meaning.¹⁴³

This process is called, by Blanchot, a circle, a sort of rhetorical model he has applied for
years, at least dating back to “La littérature et le droit à la mort.”

The récit, Blanchot asks us to imagine, is like a circle neutralizing life.

Storytelling puts the neutre into play. But what is the neutre? For the neutre to be
understood (if understanding it is even a goal), it seems one must constantly have
recourse to this enigmatic word which is pure enigma. The neutre (our circle) represents
a sort of relationship between what is and what is said; if we imagine the circle as
movement, these two points (is and is said) are chasing each other around the circle in
perpetual motion. In the spaces which naturally occur in the circle—also composed of
meaning—we must account for “une parole qui n’éclairerait pas n’obscurcirait pas.”¹⁴⁴

Hill describes this meaning, which is not meaning, in terms of truth but, he warns, the
neutre does not signify truth because “it is a movement of withdrawal and reinscription
that divides language from itself and exposes it to exteriority.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 177.
¹⁴⁵ Hill, 88.
Blanchot, abandoning his circle metaphor, suggests that the commonly occurring event of a ‘bad’ story is when the reader perceives someone talking “par-derrière … l’intrusion indiscrète et maladroite” of an author, a “‘je’ autoritaire encore encre dans la vie et faisant irruption sans retenue.” The storyteller’s voice destroys the circle; it abolishes limits while at the same time imposing them. Whereas the circle and its center are ideally, as Hill said, “exposed to exteriority,” this exteriority, or alterity, is radical in that it is a “centre qui ne peut-être que l’absence de tout centre.”

It is outside—beyond limits, beyond definition, beyond, even understanding. We could perhaps think of Zeno’s Paradox in relation to this discussion of limits. Achilles, racing against a tortoise, would never overtake the slow creature if the tortoise were given a small head start and each ran half the distance at a time. But racers do not run up to a limit, they run through a limit and so we must imagine a limit beyond the limit to which they strive. And yet, if both racers ran to this new limit, a further limit must be imagined beyond this first hypothetical limit, and so on. This is a way of reckoning limits outside of limits.

What is this dehors? This outside? We only know what it is not. It is not dominant, superior; it is only outside of any imaginable outside-ness. It is a “distance infinite,” similar to the other that Levinas imagines in his philosophical and ethical writing—an other that is the Most High, infinitely other—‘you.’ The outside is like the strength that will only last (suffice) up to a certain point a limit “qui est peut-être le neutre.”

Blanchot returns to an idea we first encounter in L’Espace littéraire; he repeats that “écrire, c’est passer du ‘je’ au ‘il,’” but this passage is neither a game of

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146 Blanchot, De Kafka, à Kafka, 172.
147 Ibid.
pronouns nor a designation of “un autre moi et pas d’avantage le désintérressement esthétique … il reste à savoir ce qui est en jeu quand écrire répond à l’exigence de ce ‘il’ incaractérisable.”

The uncharacterisability of this notion remains a problem not only in reading Blanchot but in using his theory in reference to other works. What is this il, this impersonal ‘it’? “It” is, according to Blanchot, the obscure event that happens when a story is told. He places this telling in a historical context, alluding to the epic storyteller, the historian, and the muse as points along a continuum of tellers each bearing witness to how “raconter est mystérieux.” Instead of trying to solve the mystery or even modestly accepting the mystery, we can say that Blanchot is prolonging the mystery, adding mystery to the mystery.

The mysterious il of the epic divides itself—il became “cohérence impersonelle d’une histoire,” but as we have seen in Don Quixote, “l’histoire” became disenchanted. From this disenchantment, realism, the art of the bourgeois, would grow and privilege the banality of reality over the heroism of fantasy. Il, in this context, is “le quotidien sans exploit, ce qui arrive quand rien n’arrive,” but simultaneously “le ‘il’ marque l’intrusion du personnage.” Novelists, in this model, Blanchot explains, renounce the power to say ‘I’ and give this power to others—the little egos that populate fictional space. The individual in the novel “s’affirme dans sa richesse subjective, sa liberté intérieure, sa psychologie,” which supposes that “le cours du monde reste celui de la particularité

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148 Blanchot, 173.
149 Ibid., 174.
150 Ibid. (author’s emphasis).
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid., 174-75.
individuelle.”\textsuperscript{153} We see, then, the appearance of two ‘things’ called ‘il:’ something that relates the objective of the telling under a concerned eye as well as the individuals in the fiction, which Blanchot describes as “une constellation de vies individuelles, de subjectivités … ‘il’ [a noun] multiple et personalise.” In the interval, we find the narrator’s voice which can be both or neither fictional or presented “sans masque.”\textsuperscript{154}

Transitioning from a historical discussion of genre to a question of technique, Blanchot is careful to avoid having his concept of impersonalization of subjectivity confused for an impersonality of style, a “distance ésthétique” where “le romancier ne doit pas intervenir.” Kafka, as Robert and Szanto demonstrate, belongs to this mode of narrative consciousness. Blanchot evokes Flaubert as the master of this technique according to which commentary and intrusion are “pêchés capitaux.”\textsuperscript{155} Even in 1964, eight years before Szanto’s study, Blanchot uses the term narrative consciousness, a concept that performs two separate feats: to maintain aesthetic distance and to keep the reader at a distance. It is as if the writer is seeking to prove that the work of art exists without him, Blanchot suggests. Narrative consciousness, then, is supposedly an instance where “raconter [va] de soi.”\textsuperscript{156}

Blanchot, however, begins the very next paragraph with the opposite sentiment, “raconter ne va pas de soi.”\textsuperscript{157} Traditionally the narrative act is undertaken by a character who retells a series of events in which he has already been imbedded,\textsuperscript{158} but these events,
by way of being narrated are “en train de se vivre.” The narrator is the center around which the narrative is constructed and everything is filtered through his perspective. There is a “‘je’ privilégié,” a third person narrator whose perspective is reduced so that he knows nothing more than what it is possible for him to know; all external narratorial knowledge is effaced. In these examples, individual consciousness is balanced against “l’acte narratif et la transparence d’une conscience.”¹⁵⁹ There has always been a “conscience parlante,” but Blanchot suggests that the nature of this narrative entity is shifting and not so clearly delineated as it once was in the conventional novel.

**Narrative Neutrality**

Blanchot argues that Kafka’s writing exhibits something quite different from the conventional novel or even the novel where the narrator has been seemingly erased (i.e. Flaubert). Even if Kafka admired Flaubert, many differences separate these two writer’s approaches and styles. Distance in Kafka, Blanchot relates, is less an aesthetic distance than it is an “étrangété irreductible,” which is “le milieu du monde romanesque, l’espace où déploie … l’expérience narrative, celle qu’on ne raconte pas, mais qui est en jeu quand on raconte.”¹⁶⁰ It is difficult to describe or account for an experience which is not related but put in to play when related—this experience is a murmur, a rustling in the narrative action.¹⁶¹ The radical strangeness of Kafka’s distance is also the distance that the character feels from himself which in turn introduces “dans la narration la plus rigoureuse l’altération d’une parole autre de l’autre comme parole (comme écriture).”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Blanchot, *De Kafka, à Kafka*, 178.
¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
¹⁶¹ We might equate it to insomnia.
¹⁶² Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 178.
The product of this strangeness is not so much a process of defamiliarization or even a phenomenological original experience but rather the impossibility for the reader who once may have identified with a story—if even remotely—to do so once “l’étrange lointain devient l’enjeu.” Blanchot illustrates this point with Henry James’ *The Ambassadors.*¹⁶³ Distanced as the reader is, Blanchot argues that the reader is no longer “concerned” by questions of story or literature; instead it is a space of “non-concernant.”¹⁶⁴ Unlike Flaubert who was like God in the universe, removed at a comfortable distance, for Kafka, this distance is no longer “à son aise,” and this rupture is felt by the reader. The reader experiences an absolute distance, a repulsion from all distance. The reader is “désintéressé,” non-concerned and so *il* (the author, the narrator) is “privé de l’intérêt de la lecture;” he no longer observes things from afar, he cannot maintain the distance that was previously established. What is more, “ce n’est plus de vision qu’il s’agit.” Blanchot is suggesting that the locus of action is being shifted from that which “donne à voir” by the perspective of an actor-spectator. The “circonspection narrative du ‘je’ … est subtilement ébranlé, sans … prendre fin.”¹⁶⁵ It would seem, in this act of destabilizing the power, perspective, and attention to detail of the *je* that untold ambiguity enters into the récit.

In a phrase that provides grist for Paul Davies’ article, Blanchot asserts that what Kafka teaches us is that “raconter met en jeu le neutre.” Narration that rules the neutre has been subordinated by / to the impersonalized / depersonalized voice of *il.* *Il* does not

¹⁶³ Ibid., 179.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
take the place of je instead it “déstite tout sujet,” and all transitive action.\textsuperscript{166} As Blanchot describes the \textit{neutre}, we can imagine that that-which-is-told (\textit{la parole}) is in fact told by no one and that the disintegration of the acting subjectivity stretches all the way to the little egos, the subjects as characters who then fall into “un rapport de non-identification avec eux-mêmes.” They lack identification with themselves and tend to be defined as much by the mystery of what they are not as by the reality of what they are. In the case of K., his strained relationship with the authorities of the Castle finally results in a tension exhibited in his strained relationship with himself. The distance of the narration and persistent use of alienating techniques does not just maintain a distance between the author and the narrator, the narrator and his work, or the reader and the work, but it also distances the characters from their literary being.

Characters, Blanchot repeats, lose the power to ‘say’ as they are caught in a closed loop of fictional time and space—what happens to them has always happened to them. The character, and especially K., exists from nothing. Like Robert’s description of the man without qualities, he is a character without name, family, and history, existing in a textual oblivion that Blanchot labels an “oubli qui les introduit dans le présent sans mémoire.”\textsuperscript{167} This “parole narrante,” as Blanchot labels it, is a voice, a telling, that “se [met] à l’épreuve de cet oubli premier qui précède, fonde et ruine toute mémoire.”\textsuperscript{168} The characters seem to have no memory; they recall no previous life, no prior experience, and no earlier relationships. They exist in this other fictional world to wander at the behest of a narratorial presence, which, Blanchot interrupts himself, is no presence at all. The

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 180.
\textsuperscript{167} Blanchot, \textit{De Kafka, à Kafka}, 180.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 181.
existence of this presence which is not present is an echo of language. It is part of the “tourment du langage;”¹⁶⁹ a search for language’s infinity, but the writing is a sort of “détour,” a wandering among language’s possibility and a perpetual “détournement.” Writing, in this scenario, is thus experimentation, wandering, and a confrontation with something that is wholly other to writer, reader, and character: the Other.

This *il* narrative, Blanchot explains, marks the intrusion of “l’autre,” recognized as it is by its irreducible strangeness or distance. “L’autre parle,” Blanchot maintains, but this invites a series of contradictions and paradoxes. Principal among them, Blanchot muses, is the fact that when the other speaks, nothing speaks. The *neutre*, then, exhibits itself as “aphonie.” A voicelessness, or the absence of all voice, or even the presence of all voices. Or, if we adapt Blanchot’s description of language, it is the presence of the gap left from the absence of voice. Blanchot calls it a voice with no place in the work; the *il* is a void in the work, a “mot-absence.” Blanchot describes this “mot-absence” as a hole in the text that “dit l’œuvre à partir de ce lieu sans lieu où l’œuvre se tait.”¹⁷⁰ What can be seen in this description is the conflict between place and no-place as well as the tension between speaking and silencing. The *neutre*, we can imagine, moves dynamically between these two axes, from place to no-place, from speech to silence. Never still, never locatable, never placeable, but always, it seems, at work.

The narrating voice, Blanchot repeats, is *neutre*. This neutrality has certain traits which he delineates. It 1) says nothing; 2) is without existence; 3) speaks from nowhere; 4) is “en suspens” of all stories; 5) does not dissipate in the (metaphorical) light that,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid.
though invisible, would make things visible; 6) is radically exterior and comes from the
enigmatic “outside” of language; 7) cannot be incarnated; 8) can borrow the voice of a
character; 9) is always different. Not to be confused with objectivity in thought, style, or
language, the *neutre* is the negation of all things, which, in negating itself also
promulgates itself, but not in order to create new declarations but rather to negate, or
neutralize, any further announcement.

In this hesitating definition, we notice a spectral or ghost-like creation.

Something, if we chose to imagine it, that is immaterial yet present, dead yet ongoing, a
reflection of something else yet not that else, it is both “fantomatique”\(^{171}\) and other. Like
a spectral apparition, it has no center because it has no materiality; it presents “afocalité”
and “tend … à s’absenter en celui qui la porte et aussi à l’effacer lui-même contre centre”
because it prevents the work from having a center. Deprived of a center, spectral in its
posthumous being, it lacks something, the “mot-absence” which also prevents the whole
from ever being fully completed. The *neutre* “ne lui [permet] pas non plus d’exister
comme un tout achevé, une fois et à jamais accomplie.”\(^{172}\) A récit in this context could
“end” like Kafka’s in that they are abandoned before completion or exist in a sort of
closed textual loop\(^{173}\) where the story peters out or ends in abeyance, like much of
Blanchot’s fiction or the narrative works of Beckett.

Though the work may be de-centered, silent, and unfinished, we still recognize a
fundamental distance which is preserved in these works and a signal of the *neutre*. But
the *neutre*, as Blanchot elaborates, dodges or absorbs all attempts to erase it, account for

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\(^{171}\) Blanchot, *De Kafka, à Kafka*, 182.

\(^{172}\) Ibid., 183.

\(^{173}\) James Joyce and Robbe-Grillet come to mind.
it, or eliminate it. The *neutre* cannot be neutralized. The *neutre*, infinite distance that it is, neither reveals nor hides itself. But this does not mean that it has no meaning, but rather it “ouvre dans le langage un pouvoir autre.” It is this other power that is so intriguing—what is this power and what is an ‘other’ power? Lastly, Blanchot says that the *neutre* suspends the attributive structure of language, in other words, it enables ambiguity—the ambiguity of literary language which he describes in “Le Langage de fiction.”

In *La Pensée du dehors* (1986), in the subsection “Le Compagnon,” Michel Foucault characterizes Blanchot’s conception of the *neutre* in the following way:

> Comme si, en ce retrait, en ce creux qui n’est peut-être rien de plus que l’érosion invincible de la personne qui parle, l’espace d’un langage neutre se libérait ; entre le narrateur et ce compagnon indissociable qui ne l’accompagne pas, le long de cette ligne étroite qui les sépare comme elle sépare le Je parlant du Il qu’il est en son être parlé, tout le récit se précipite, déployant un lieu sans lieu qui est le dehors de toute parole et de toute écriture, et qui les fait apparaître, les dépossède, leur impose sa loi, manifeste dans son déroulement infini leur miroitement d’un instant, leur étincelante disparation.\(^{174}\)

We notice in this description that even to attempt a description of the *neutre* one has recourse only to metaphor or what we may call fiction: a companion who is not present. A gap exists, and this gap is filled by an absent companion. The *neutre* as a concept becomes almost unrepresentable by anything other than fiction, which is why we may recognize it in a fictional telling even if our telling of this description falls short of describing this presence which we recognize only by not being able to fully represent it.

These observations—the *neutre* at work—reflect on the existence of language and the creation of narrative. Like the writer who is not a writer until he writes, we see that

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“tout langage commence par énoncer et, en énonçant, affirme.”\textsuperscript{175} It is performative as the author is performative. Before it exists it is nothing. But once written, spoken, or enunciated, the author, the text, and the discourse exist and cannot cease to exist. The implications of this existence are that “la voix narrative est … la plus critique qui puisse, inentendue, donne à entendre.”\textsuperscript{176} As Blanchot insists on the critical nature of this voice, we can also imagine the reliance on commentary to attempt to explain or at the very least describe this voice, this other \textit{il}, this neutrality.

\textbf{A Return to Commentary}

As we return to commentary, we also return to “Le Pont de bois,” our figurative entrance into Blanchot’s discussion of Kafka. Blanchot’s approach to Kafka can be categorized as three separate strategies. He analyzes language, origin, and being in general and discusses how they play a role as regards the writer, the character, and commentary. In the domain of the writer we must acknowledge solitude, the renunciation of saying ‘I,’ and the entrance into the desert. With the character we will notice the chronic wandering of his condition, his impatience, as well as his relation to literary history—as a sort of palimpsest. Lastly, in the domain of commentary, we have discussed the absence embedded in the work which calls for commentary but which also makes commentary superfluous. Criticism can be a sort of echo or repetition, but it is also its own work which fits into the larger tradition of works calling for their own commentary.

\textsuperscript{175} Blanchot, \textit{De Kafka à Kafka}, 184.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
Chapter 4

The Ways of Solitude, Error, and Patience in *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*

**Part One: The Ways of Solitude**

The previous chapter offered a survey of Maurice Blanchot’s readings of and critical encounters with Franz Kafka’s oeuvre, including his novels, short stories, journals and correspondences. Blanchot’s writing circles around a relatively small number of themes, which may be enumerated as 1) the idea that literature is in fact a questioning; 2) the repetitive and infinite nature of criticism; 3) the absence that characterizes language and which creates 4) ambiguity (termed *neutre*) in the fictional creation; 5) the movement from *je* to *il* which distinguishes literature as such; and 6) the collaboration between errancy and error that unites the work of the writer, reader, and critic as well as characterizes the “petits égos” which populate literary space.

In the current chapter we will employ Blanchot’s critical vision of Kafka as a framework to reread *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*. Because Blanchot’s critical approach to Kafka treats Kafka as a writer (not just a tortured soul), in addition to

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examining the works and their afterlife in the critical domain, the novels that we will be reading offer a unique opportunity to experiment with Blanchot’s critical texts, which tend toward abstract conceptualization in lieu of concrete exegetical explanation.

Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Dans le labyrinthe* is ostensibly the story of a writer at work and as such we will read this book as a literal illustration of Blanchot’s ideas of the transformative power writing has on a writer who passes from *je* to *il*. Because *Aminadab* is written by Blanchot, it presents complications and advantages in analyzing the novel from a Blanchodian standpoint. It is problematic to apply too strictly a critic’s own hermeneutic language against his or her fictional work. At the same time, *Aminadab*, published in 1943, appears several years before Blanchot’s first published essay on Kafka. This means that we can look at *Aminadab* as a text relatively independent of Blanchot’s Kafka’s writings, but a text which still demonstrates a marked predilection toward the Kafkaesque. We might imagine a continuum in Blanchot’s writing, both fictional and critical. Here is a writer, deeply affected by Kafka’s writing but at the same time an author who showed a predisposition towards *idées kafkaïennes* ideas that predate his provable introduction to Kafka’s texts.

In this chapter, using Blanchot’s writing on Kafka as our critical framework, we will begin by analyzing *Dans le labyrinthe* insofar as it offers unexplored material regarding the notion of a Blanchodian author; we will analyze the status of fiction as “other” worldly (outside), next we will overlap our study of *Dans le labyrinthe* with *Aminadab* to study sickness, wandering, and errancy before concluding the chapter by looking at *Aminadab*’s very specific relationship to (im)patience and selfhood. In this last
chapter of the main body of our project, we will notice, especially in the domain of patience and selfhood, an ethical note begin to be sounded, a motif which many critics believe was Kafka’s ultimate ethos and which Blanchot challenges, complicates, and perhaps even enriches.

The literary lives of Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot intersect rarely, yet these intersections will prove to be quite noteworthy. Blanchot published only one review of a Robbe-Grillet book, *Le Voyeur.*² Christophe Bident finds occasion to mention Robbe-Grillet only twice in his biography of Blanchot; the first time he is referenced is in a citation from Madeleine Chapsal and the second time is in a footnote annotating notable members of the *Manifeste des 121.*³ At first blush, it seems that Blanchot was not overly concerned with Robbe-Grillet, even if he was instrumental (along with Georges Bataille) in awarding Robbe-Grillet the 1955 *Prix des critiques* for *Le Voyeur.* The details of this episode are not included in *Partenaire invisible* and we have only Robbe-Grillet’s gratitude which is repeated on several occasions in *Préface à une vie d’écrivain.*

Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, mentions Blanchot on several occasions in his 2003 lectures for *France Culture,* later edited and published by Seuil in 2005 as *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Préface à une vie d’écrivain.* This collection of quasi-interviews and short lecture-like speeches effectively accounts for Robbe-Grillet’s last word to the reading public.⁴ In these musings, Robbe-Grillet refers twice to Blanchot’s maxim that all writers project themselves toward silence, and he graciously acknowledges Blanchot for his

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³ Bident, *Partenaire Invisible,* 394 and 396.
⁴ *Un Roman sentimental* was also published in 2005, and several film projects were in various stages of production.
support in bestowing the aforementioned *Prix de critiques*. Robbe-Grillet even talks about Blanchot’s involvement in the *Manifeste des 121*, describing him as a humorless man who never smiled, this in comparison to Bataille who was warm and seemingly possessed boundless energy.

The ways in which Robbe-Grillet uses Blanchot are less a direct application and more as a peripheral allusion. Few (if any) of Robbe-Grillet’s critics will engage directly with Blanchot by name; however a strong bond unites these two writers—both in terms of fiction and criticism. The concerns of both writers deal with language, literary tradition, and the construction of literary spaces, characters, and plots. Though Robbe-Grillet may more actively contests the notions of chronology, reliability of narration, and point of view, Blanchot’s theory does entertain such formal innovations. Robbe-Grillet is clearly a reader and follower of Blanchot even if their works overtly intersect only rarely. In the twenty-first lecture of *Préface à une vie d’écrivain*, Robbe-Grillet discusses his own work and how it has been received critically. He compares his work to Blanchot’s and cites a number of consistencies between the two, but more importantly, he examines an important distinction. In referring to Raymond Radiguet’s standing in French letters, Robbe-Grillet self-deprecatingly muses that he himself had the good fortune of being boring, whereas Radiguet was amusing. It is only the boring authors, Robbe-Grillet writes with irony, who win prizes and are destined to wider literary renown. If Robbe-Grillet was simply boring then Blanchot suffered from complete incomprehensibility. He offers a candid opinion of Blanchot’s fiction, “Je risquais d’avoir bientôt autant de lecteurs que Blanchot, ce qui n’était pas grand chose. C’était un écrivain très peu
Robbe-Grillet admits that because Bruce Morissette offered a “key” to his novels—though it does not explain all the elements of Robbe-Grillet’s writing—he was understood and even accepted. Blanchot never had any similar critic do the same, and thus never gained access to a wider reading public.

In a second passage from Préface à une vie d’écrivain, Robbe-Grillet refers to Barthes and Blanchot, Robbe-Grillet good-naturedly admonishes their respective readings of Le Voyeur as being, in fact, less a reading of his novel than of being a reading of themselves. Robbe-Grillet claims with some humor that “c’était fascinant de les lire, parce qu’on aurait dit qu’ils ne parlaient pas du même livre.” Robbe-Grillet’s expression is self-explanatory because neither Blanchot nor Barthes was concerned with explicating the text, instead they used Le Voyeur as a point of departure.

Barthes, in Essais Critiques, discusses the use of language and objectivity. Blanchot’s article, unlike that of Barthes, speaks at length about “le crime sexuel,” which is at the heart of the narrative of Le Voyeur even if it is never narrated in its own right—some readers have even come to doubt its very existence. This lack, absence, or silence at the center of Le Voyeur is a device present in almost all of Robbe-Grillet’s work, especially his early-period novels which also includes Les Gommes, La Jalousie, and Dans le Labyrinthe. All of these novels are characterized by what Robbe-Grillet calls “le roman de manque,” such as the murder in Le Voyeur, the affair in La Jalousie, and the Soldier’s mission in Dans le labyrinthe.

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5 Robbe-Grillet, Préface à une vie d’écrivain (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 185.
6 Ibid., 180.
7 Ibid., 185.
In Chapter Two, we discussed the Soldier’s quest, but what remains absent as regards his mission is a certain sense of purpose. We know what he is doing: returning a box filled with a dead comrade’s affairs to the parents. We do not is why or how. The reader, like the Soldier, remains ignorant of the family’s name, the street’s name, and ultimately, the soldier’s motivation. Is he a traitor as some of the townspeople suspect? Is he a spy as others fear? What mysterious illness does he carry in his run-down body? How can he learn if he is even in the correct town? What is the Soldier’s ontological relationship to the writer that conceivably created him? We shall discover, with the aid of Blanchot’s theory, how the mission of the Soldier which starts as a “but sans chemin,” slowly becomes a “cheminement sans but,” as Blanchot discussed in L’Espace littéraire.

“Je suis seul ici”

*Dans le labyrinthe* is the story of a soldier wandering the snowy streets of an unknown city trying to return a box to a dead comrade’s family. The *récit*, however, is recounted by a subjectivity (a writer, presumably) who is sitting in a hermetically sealed room with a window and several inanimate objects, including a highly realistic painting entitled “*La Défaite à Reichenfals.*” It is this subjectivity, this seated figure who possesses a preternatural capacity for observation and imagination, it is on this hazy personage that we will first focus our attention, for it is to this ill-defined bundle that the first word of the book breathes life: *Je*

“Je suis seul ici, maintenant, bien à l’abri.” Three things immediately stand out in this opening phrase: the present tense verb of being, the locational “here,” and the temporal “now.” Whoever or whatever is offering this phrase is doing so in an imminent

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sense. He (we can be sure because of the agreement with the adjective) is calling himself into existence simply by writing. “Tout langage commence par énoncer,” Blanchot writes, highlighting that at one point one has not written and one is not a writer, but having written one is a writer, “et, en énonçant, affirme.” 9 Before, there was nothing, a blank page, an *avertissemment* by Robbe-Grillet; now, there is something, a pronoun asserting its raw existence. But this something has been anchored to the reader’s concrete reality because he exists here and now—as if to counterbalance the reader who exists there, in a time anterior to the creation of the book and the telling of the story.

We know nothing else about this subject, only that he is alone. In this aloneness—the only modifier in the clause—we are reminded immediately of Blanchot’s idea of the essential solitude of the writer. The *je*, who we will later learn—or assume—is the writer of the text, is inextricably alone. “Bien à l’abri,” he is cut off from the outside, from *dehors*, a word that will begin the very next sentence. The lonely *je* who has no characteristics aside from his solitude, does something radical in the telling of his tale. From page eleven, which is, in fact, the first page of the text, to page twenty, a radical metamorphosis takes place: *je* disappears, “il destitue,” to borrow the verb of Blanchot. In what amounts to a very literal illustration of Blanchot’s description of how literature begins when *je* becomes *il* the *je* narrator of *Dans le labyrinthe* effaces himself, literally disintegrating into the telling of the story. The first person becomes *il*, le Soldat. It is not until 200 pages later that *je* returns, but at this point it never becomes the subject of a verb (no transitive verb exists in the narration of the novel with this *je* as its subject) but instead it is as a possessive pronoun “*ma visite*” and the personal pronoun which

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9 Blanchot, *De Kafka à Kafka*, 184.
effectively bookends the writer’s presence in the novel, moi. It is, however, what happens in between these various employments of je that is truly notable.

After the je has been established, the word dehors, a basic term in Blanchot’s idiom, appears as if to disrupt the narrating voice of the novel. “Dehors,” it commands, and the reader is pushed from the subjectivity, however limited and under-developed it may be, into a radical exteriority, an outside of pure impersonality (neuralité). It is notable that Robbe-Grillet’s dehors is voiced by il, but this third person is not yet the il of Blanchot’s “voix narrative,” instead it is an intermediary step, the impersonal voice of weather. “Il pleut,” we are told. But this rain is quickly negated or contradicted by yet another dehors. We are still outside, pushed far from the room, but this time, two pages later but still now, “il neige.”

Dehors appears four times in this opening paragraph and over the course of the next eleven pages we are deprived of any subject. A phantom “on,” a sort of proto-subject, walks, but otherwise we are offered only a list of objects—some in the room, some on the street, others imagined by the subjectivity which has essentially cancelled itself out by casting the story outside. Willfully effacing himself and, in writing, choosing to step outside of himself to disappear in le dehors of the weather as part of a larger movement toward the il of an entirely new subjectivity, an other which is, in this instance, called “le Soldat.” This il however requires several pages to come into existence—there is a marked effort to distill his being from the textual void from which

10 The narrator concludes the novel by positioning “toute la ville derrière moi” (Dans le labyrinthe, 221).
11 Robbe-Grillet, Dans le labyrinthe, 11. Todorov (no great fan of Blanchot), Barthes, and Genette have all theorized about this impersonal, intransitive use of verbs and the disappearance of the subject. Their arguments, it seems, are more limited to a strictly grammatical approach to the construction of language as opposed to Blanchot’s radical approach to the telling of a story by a non-entity.
He issues. It is as if the author is struggling to create him, to give him life, but also struggling to renounce his own individuality, his own ability to say \textit{je}.

This process is brought to the fore “dehors [où] il neige.”\textsuperscript{12} Within this external snow, confusion reigns. The story contradicts itself and what it has previously stated as having happened. Whereas before, even on the first page of the novel, rain, wind, cold, and sunny skies are evoked, the text insists that “Dehors il neige. Dehors il a neigé, il neigeait, dehors il neige.”\textsuperscript{13} There is a sort of narrative hysteria to what could otherwise be a very simple description of the weather outside. With no voice to do the narrating and no subject whose actions can be narrated, a frightening narrative purgatory engulfs the text. But just as quickly as it appears, it disappears in a series of geometric descriptions of the street, a crossroads, a house, a sidewalk, and a streetlight. This external description switches to return inside where a fly is casting its shadow, and this nebulous shadow, this “zone obscure”\textsuperscript{14} is like the void in which a narrative can be composed. From the blank darkness of a shadow, in the midst of a terrible exile, a character is soon to be constructed and the metamorphosis from \textit{je} to \textit{il} will be attempted. But this construction is not easy, it only happens in stages: “Un peu plus haut, une hanche, un bras, une épaule s’appuient contre le fût du réverbère.”\textsuperscript{15} Not yet a body, not yet a whole, the reader can only be shown glimpses, anatomical parts, before they coalesce into “l’homme” who is “vêtu d’une capote militaire.”\textsuperscript{16} From this first hazy, then more concrete figure of a man, it is not until four pages later that he is given the title “le Soldat” which composes his entire

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 11, 14.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
identity. He is the carrier of the box, the catalyst of the story. He is the shadow of the writer who has abandoned any pretense to selfhood, been deprived the right to say *je*, henceforth he is nothing but *il*, “le Soldat.”

The movement from *je* to *il* is visible in the effacement of the entity of the writer who is separated physically, geographically, emotionally, and psychically from the rest of the city, from the rest of life, until he has totally denied his own subjectivity and writes the liberating pronoun *il*. Far from *je* and far from himself, this *il* is slowly adorned with characteristics which would make him an ego in its own right. *Il* now has a profession, Soldier. *Il* has a mission, a purpose: to deliver the box. *Il* even has physical needs and emotional impulses: fatigue, thirst, fever, a desire to speak and to communicate with other little egos of the textual environment (one star, to pursue Blanchot’s metaphor evoked in “La voix narrative,” among many in the constellation of little egos). But yet, something is missing. This ‘but yet’ is the entire story, the story of a lack—an unnamable, un-locatable lack. Something hinted at but never enunciated. Even with one thousand more pages it could never be explained. ‘But yet’ plagues *Dans le labyrinthe* because the reader is constantly running into a certain lack, a gap—something that is undeniably present in all literature but which is exacerbated by Robbe-Grillet’s style, atmosphere, and textual environment.

This lack can be found in all aspects of the text—in the architecture, in the stuttering conversations, in the dark, cold streets. It is perhaps most obvious when we

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consider the solitude of the author and its metamorphosis into solitude in the work.

Solitude in Robbe-Grillet is different from solitude found in other novelists’ work. Rather than feeling the artist’s personal pain seep out through the text, the reader of Robbe-Grillet is so aware of the literary (formal, technical) constructions at work, that empathizing with a character’s solitude is perhaps the least of one’s concerns. And yet, the solitude of the characters is an undeniable and integral part of the novel. In Dans le labyrinthe we know the Soldier is alone, it says so explicitly on at least three occasions, and the use of such indicators as “absent, vide, silence, obscur” help to reinforce this solitariness—but we do not necessarily feel for him as one is meant to empathize with a Werther or an Adolphe. The reader is aware that the Soldier is alone, but it is entirely possible that (s)he is not that concerned about this fact. But, I would argue, one could be. Robbe-Grillet’s works is not just technical or formal. Many content-based concerns enrich his work and align themselves with Blanchot’s critical writing, solitude just being the most present in this instance.

“Je n’ai jamais parlé d’autre chose que de moi,”18 Robbe-Grillet writes in Le Miroir qui revient. I am reading this assertion without irony, as Robbe-Grillet’s sincere expression of his motivations to write. If we trust this phrase, we are given the opportunity to encounter Robbe-Grillet’s fiction in a slightly different light. Though not a Soldier, a watch salesman, nor, we may assume, a jealous husband per se, we may surmise that Robbe-Grillet has always wanted to express something about solitude (the loneliness of writing), wandering, loneliness, and alienation—each of these feelings, following Blanchot’s description of writing, are known by the author.

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Robbe-Grillet, the author of the introductory note, and one of many *Je* who has denied his existence to write a novel, is a man alone. Biographically speaking, he does not seem to suffer from the same existential despair that clouded Kafka’s life, especially as evidenced in the latter’s journals and correspondence. We do not know Robbe-Grillet’s romantic situations to the same detailed degree as Kafka’s, nor, for that matter, his standing with his family. What we do know comes from *Le Miroir qui revient*, a text Robbe-Grillet called more fictional than his novels, thus complicating his biographical record. But none of these abstractions quite matter. The writer is alone, and it is this fact that counts. Solitude engulfs all those who pick up the pen and dare to face literature.

We know the *je* of the opening sentences of *Dans le labyrinthe* is placed in an awkward attitude to the outside. “Dehors,” he says, “il neige … il pleut … il fait beau.” The outside that is evoked in this passage reinforces his position as inside, where he is “bien à l’abri,” but this insideness is misleading, for one of Blanchot’s goals of writing is to do away with the dichotomy of inside/outside and instead to try to think outside/outside. In this case, the writer is outside of himself, writing about the outside, the street, the Soldier. These external scenes remain far outside of his experience and his capacity to control. These shifting notions of outsideness are like a circle that is constantly shifting its foci. In relation to the street, the weather, the fictional text (embedded in this fiction) the writer (the *je* subjectivity) is outside. As a writer (*bien à l’abri*), he is outside of society, beyond community, exposed to the rhetorical desert, which is evoked, in part, by the dust which covers all the surfaces of the room. He is outside, not “bien à l’abri” as we
would like to think, but rather ontologically exposed to the harsh conditions of solitude and loneliness. A *je* deprived of the status of *je*, forcing itself to become *il*.

A change is effectuated, *je* becomes *il*. Now it is the Soldier, a new subjectivity, who must live the writer’s loneliness, who must face the elements—wind, cold, snow, aridity, darkness—and must do so alone. This transformation, a fictional depiction, will not cure the writer’s solitude (we are reminded at the end of the novel that this writer is still seated at his desk with “toute la ville derrière moi”); fiction is not compensation for solitude, it is merely the presentation of his solitude (*malheur*). To whom is this presented? He writes and in so doing, he performs an act as if to say ‘here I am’ or perhaps ‘there I am’. Where? The only answer Blanchot would provide is “loin d’ici” or “À l’autre rive.” There, over there, far from here, in the un-placeable desert.

We may interpret the writer’s solitude similarly to how Blanchot figures Kafka’s loneliness, by a wandering-in-the-desert existence. The Soldier’s apartness is produced by being physically and psychically apart, communicatively inhibited, and irredeemably fatigued. He embodies a paradoxical combination of insomnia and somnambulism. We locate this attitude in the Soldier’s body language and his pained movements through the city. Towards the end of the novel, after having been shot, the Soldier is cared for by a woman who “assure qu’il était déjà malade, avant sa blessure, qu’il avait de la fièvre et qu’il agissait parfois comme un somnambule.” The woman’s description effectively summarizes the Soldier’s bearing throughout the entire novel: sick, apart, moving as if already dead. The vocabulary of the text only reinforces the Soldier’s illness which

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19 Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe*, 221.
20 Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe*, 216.
wavers ambiguously between illness and fatigue to such a degree that the reader cannot
determine if one is the cause and the other the effect or even if chronological concerns are
important. This passage acts as a *mise-en-abîme* for the *récit*, one of the points of
intersection between the writer/subjectivity and the *récit* that he narrates, the point in
which the painting becomes animate, the description of the Soldier once again reinforces
his fatigue, his solitude, and the hopelessness that his mission embodies.

The reader is presented with the confusing conditions of the Soldier’s existence.
His mission is known but the details are not. The Soldier, unsure which street he should
be following, is at the mercy of the advice of the townspeople. But these interactions
underscore the separation, the distance that divides the town from the Soldier. They tell
him that there is no Rue Boucharet, and suggest Rue Boulard in its stead, but this second
street, “C’est pas tout près,” an observation that nearly sends the Soldier into despair. The
speaker looks over the Soldier who is “assis sur sa chaise, les mains posées à plat sur les
cuisses, le dos un peu voûté, le paquet défraîchi toujours serré sous son bras, en le
considérant avec une insistance qui a l’air d’évaluer le nombre de kilomètres qu’il est
encore capable de parcourir avant de s’effondrer pour de bon.”21 The posture of the
Soldier betrays his fatigue; he is seated with his hands on his thighs and his back slightly
arched, and he could fall asleep at any moment, as he later does. The Soldier, unable or
unwilling to communicate with the other café patrons, cannot speak of his fatigue but it is
nonetheless plainly visible to onlookers who gauge how much further he could continue
on; the use of the phrase “s’effondrer pour de bon,” which indicates the imminence of
collapse, suggests that this distance cannot be great.

21 Ibid., 84.
The descriptions of his fatigue and borderline sickness, though in the presence of others, signal the solitude of the Soldier who has no voice and no means of expressing his fatigue or illness. He seems to be at the mercy of those whose path he crosses, even if no effort is made to unite or bond with these passersby. In this sense, the soldier’s fatigue and illness take on an almost metaphoric expression of his loneliness—as if he lives in perpetual quarantine. He is not trusted; when he enters a house, he is treated as an intruder. When the child is asked to lead him through the streets, the child maintains a wide berth, leading him by several meters. When he is in the café, he sits alone, drinks alone, and sleeps alone. In the barracks he does not interact with the other soldiers. In the city, he does not speak meaningfully with the denizens. In this way a sort of contradiction arises which ultimately highlights his solitude. Everywhere he goes, he is noticed, remarked, even commented upon, but his solitude is never breached. It is as if an impermeable bubble surrounds him, a bubble that no word from outside can penetrate and no word from within can escape. Though he is separated, alone, and incommunicative, the Soldier interacts with the townspeople in one special way, by means of questions.

*Le mode interrogatif*

The first line of dialogue in *Dans le labyrinthe* is a question and this observation is of prime importance to a Blanchodian reading of this novel. “Tu dors?” asks a child. We see in this very simple inquiry something that is both indicative of Robbe-Grillet’s novel and also illustrative of Blanchot’s theories; it is what Blanchot terms *le mode interrogatif*. In both “Kafka et la littérature” and “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre” Blanchot explains that literature begins the moment that it becomes a question, explicitly
stating in the latter essay that literature exists in “le mode interrogatif.” In Chapter Two, we explored the way that questions functions in *Dans le labyrinthe* in regard to the *Perceval* legend. In this instance, our goal is to examine the ways in which the questioning tone of Robbe-Grillet’s novel exhibit some of the attributes of Blanchot’s analysis of the modes of fiction as well as the narrating voice, the *neutre*.

“Tu dors?” as a question obviously means something different than the statement “je dors.” Blanchot employs a different phrase to illustrate his principle; he describes literature as the movement from “je suis malheureux” toward “tu es malheureux?” A question, as the entry point into literature, allows us to look at *Dans le labyrinthe* by way of the questions which punctuate the text. Questions are asked among the characters, they are asked to oneself as thought and they are embedded in the text as rhetorical flourish or as outright inquiries made of the reader. The sheer profusion of questions in *Dans le labyrinthe* leads us to demand what is known within this text. The answer is: very little. And yet, something is known—despite the interrogatory haze which clouds the text—or, if not known, something is at least happening.

Questions issue forth from two sources in the text: the characters and the narration. However, this second questioning force has been so effaced (there is no real voice) that we may say that it is less the narrator and rather simply the text which questions, or even say “it questions,” allowing for *it* to mean both “a narrating presence” as well as a “speaker in the text.” In the first instance we notice the inclusion of parenthetical or embedded question in the narration. These are questions which seem crucial to the details of a text, and the narrating presence seems to acknowledge the
limitations of its own ability to know. “Dans l’entrebâillement de la porte…la silhouette d’un enfant se tient immobile, tournée vers l’homme en costume militaire que sa mère (est-ce sa mère?) vient d’introduire.”22 The question in this description is crucial for the absence that it is allowing to be displayed. The narration refers to the woman as a mother, perhaps simply as a placeholder, and then immediately admits that there is no certainty as to whether it is this child’s mother (or a mother at all). We may assume that the consciousness that must ask if it is the child’s mother is the Soldier’s, acting as the previously explored ‘narrative consciousness.’ What may also be the case is that the narrative presence cannot be sure, as if the narrating voice is also locked outside of any definitive knowledge. We may further assume that if Dans le labyrinthe is the novel of a novelist constructing his fictional work, then the writer has not yet decided (or does not himself know) how the woman is related to the boy. What remains is a question mark, a voice that narrates as if groping (tâtonner), or which exists only to pose questions and not necessarily to answer them.

In a slightly different instance, we see a similar lack of clarity. “Quand le soldat se décide à lever les yeux sur la jeune femme, celle-ci est assise en face de lui; non pas à la table, mais sur une chaise qui est située (vient-elle de l’y mettre?) devant la commode.”23 Once more we may assume that it is the Soldier, to whom the reader’s perspective has been reduced, who does not understand the chain of events. But also, the question seems directed at nothing, and the significance of knowing how and when a chair was placed in a relation to the table is, it must be admitted, hardly relevant to the

22 Robbe-Grillet, Dans le labyrinthe, 65.
23 Ibid., 70.
story at hand. The relevance comes in the narratological act, the question mark that hangs over the story and subsumes the rest of the tale. The question mark which calls attention to itself and which signals to the reader that the real tale is a tale of fiction, of writing, of the writer’s very struggle to write.

The characters that populate the snowy streets of the town are similarly limited in what they can know, and are forced to ask questions to gain knowledge; it is for this reason that their questioning seems more natural. How else could a character know if another were tired, bored, or in search of a goal if not by asking? Asking, the acknowledging of one’s limitations, serves to advance the plot and construct relationships among the characters. But these relationships are fragile at best. The character most frequently interrogated is the Soldier, and the reader cannot help but be disturbed by his total lack of knowledge. A lack of knowledge in a response can come by way of admitting that one does not know (“Je ne sais pas,” as the Soldier says on occasion), but also simply by negating a question with a simple no. In a scene where a woman is asking the Soldier about the name of the street, she inquires once more, “« Ça n’était pas Boulard, n’est-ce pas? »” and it is the reaction of the soldier which is revealing: “Et, comme le soldat la dévisage d’un air interrogatif, elle répète: ‘Rue Boulard? Ce n’est pas ça que vous cherchez?’” At first, the Soldier’s only response is a questioning glance which expresses confusion perhaps more than words, then he does speak, “‘—Non … Je ne crois pas…’ dit le soldat, sur un ton assez indécis … ‘Je ne crois pas. Non.’ Mais son interlocutrice n’est déjà plus là; et la porte, à présent s’est refermée à fond.”24 This give-and-take, or back-and-forth, is unsatisfying. We are made aware of the Soldier’s lack of

24 Ibid., 83.
knowledge and the questions of the woman serve no other purpose than to display the “lack” that the Soldier seems to embody. What is more, no real connection is made between the Soldier and the woman, for the latter disappears and the Soldier is sealed away, locked off from all others, behind a door, like the writer in the opening scenes.

Voix

We question the validity of any conversation based solely on the back and forth of questions and answers—they feel like interrogations and create an atmosphere of suspicion, coldness, strangeness, foreignness, and distance—a sort of étrangeté that permeates the text. In this constant questioning, we become aware of the quality of the voices that give substance to the inquiries. In Dans le labyrinthe, voices are at turns “lourde, grave, hesitante, incomprehensible, sourde, mal assurée, serieuse, d’une timbre adulte, indistincte, rude, sans méfiance, et bruyante.” The quality of voices in this novel depicts the act of speaking as incompatible with the act of communicating.

The voices that ask questions in Dans le labyrinthe are not simply characters giving voice to their subjective curiosity (they are doing this at times) they are also creating a tone, as if placing a mute on the novel, they tampon the sounds and voices of the novel. This tone can be equated to a jazz trumpet played through a mute which allows the notes to be heard but in a deformed, almost amorphous way. The voices in Dans le labyrinthe are not pure nor played at full volume. They are “rauques, vagues, graves,” and linked by the text to a grumble or grunt (grognement). Though voices speak, they are strained, often incommunicative, and rarely clear. Communication has broken down, and
we are made to think of a writer, distanced from himself, calling to the other; this selfless author has lost his voice and we are made aware of only a pained murmur.

The sounds embody a neutrality in the text. In chapter two we mentioned how Dans le labyrinthe was consistent with Szanto’s narrative consciousness and Robert’s distinction of neutrality of style (harkening back to a Flaubertian principle of artistic remove). In this chapter, however, we will be looking at Blanchot’s neutre. Blanchot’s concept of the neutre appears with regard to Kafka in “La Voix narrative: « le il, le neutre »,” where he describes a sort of fragmentation to writing, points that suggest a whole but never add up to a whole. Blanchot expands his argument to resist fixed meanings, stable truths, or knowable conclusions which ultimately express themselves rhetorically as circles, absent a starting point or an end point, absent an inside or an outside. He later comes to the point of the neutre as being a mysterious force that tells, an ambiguous relationship between what is and what is told. Mixing and combing various terms—outside, exterior, beyond, other—Blanchot asks the reader to imagine all of these mysteries concentrated into the “cohérence impersonelle d’une histoire,” which he says can be distilled into the ambiguous word il.

We have examined how in Dans le labyrinthe a rather literal illustration of the je becoming il can be clearly observed. In the context of voices, we likewise encounter a literal illustration of neutralité. The word neutre itself appears in the text on five occasions.25 Furthermore we see that the neutre is attached explicitly to a voice. In the café, the woman asks the Soldier “vous n’avez pas mangé,” but this phrase becomes trapped in the Soldier’s consciousness. In the silence that follows, it becomes a sort of

25 Robbe-Grillet, Dans le labyrinthe, 37, 55, 62, 64, and 142.
long-lost récit. Once told (achevé) it can only muster in the air at which point “il devient impossible de retrouver l’intonation qui paraissait à l’instant avoir un sens — crainte, ennui, doute, sollicitude, intérêt quelconque — et seule demeure la constatation ; « vous n’avez pas mangé », prononcé d’une voix neutre.” 26 This passage serves almost as a synecdoche of the entire novel as well as a parable for Blanchot’s neutre: Something happens; words are spoken, normal words, every day words of the “langue courante.” But when the writer tries to adapt these words, to rephrase them, to compose them or to inscribe them into a tale, a curious silence envelops them. They become opaque and the writer experiences fear, boredom, solitude, and doubt such that all that remains is a neutral expression, a phrase, even the same phrase, becomes impersonal and neutre. The content may be the same, but as Blanchot extensively describes using the case of the “head clerk’s having phoned,” the same phrase when re-inscribed as literature enters into a realm of neutrality and ambiguity. The reader of Dans le labyrinthe is witnessing this very procession in two quick paragraphs.

The degree to which Dans le labyrinthe is reliant upon the hazy, gravelly, or opaque nature of voices is notable. A voice is “lointaine … comme absente,” 27 and this vocal quality reflects the absence of the characters from themselves (as Blanchot writes in “La Voix narrative”). The sensations of opacity and neutrality are only reinforced by the darkness and night that surround the récit. The Soldier is constantly wandering, sightlessly groping in the night, alone, silent, and uncommunicative. Even when he tries to speak words fail him or his voice fails him. When he does manage to hold a

26 Ibid., 63-64 (my emphasis).
27 Ibid., 37.
conversation, the voices are hollow and no communication seems possible. This lack of communication expresses, in spite of itself, a larger feeling of uncertainty. The characters, in the face of such absence, no longer feel like “petits ego” but like hollow shells. They have no self, or are at a distance from their self. The writer, actively losing the power to say je has distanced all the characters from the same possibility. They express themselves in “un mode interrogatif,” asking questions or making statements in voices that have been muted, erased, and shorn of any capacity to communicate.

The voices that cannot speak at full volume express the unknown elements of the text and absences in the telling of the story. These gaps illustrate Blanchot’s ideas regarding the un-finishable quality of fiction. Circles without starting points or ending points, they nonetheless exhibit motion and never cease. It is their unfinished quality that initiates commentary. Unlike Kafka, whose novels were literally never finished, Robbe-Grillet “completed” his and published them, calling them a finished work. But in Dans le labyrinthe, the inachèvement of fiction has itself been fictionalized. The novel lacks something. This is why the writer interrupts the novel with an emphatic non. Or “C’était autre chose.” When the reader comes across these instances of rupture, (s)he cannot help but be aware of the incompleteness of the novel’s project. These interruptions call back to their beginnings where it becomes necessary to repeat the same scenes and descriptions with only minimal variations.

At the conclusion of the novel, the reappearance of the je / moi does not so much conclude the novel but rather sends it back to its beginning like a closed loop. This closed loop reinforces the fact that there is no beginning, no end, and no “achèvement.” The
paradoxical closed-ness of the text and the openness or ambiguity of what it lacks allow for the promulgation of commentary and critical speculation. It is regarding this last point that *Dans le labyrinthe* can be seen to echo the critical afterlife of Kafka’s oeuvre—whereas the latter literally left his books incomplete, leaving critics no recourse but to speculate, the former imposed the artifice of an ending which only subverts the completion of the novel, leaving it rhetorically incomplete.

**Part Two: Ways of Error**

*Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*, as we discussed in Chapter Two, have many overlapping themes. In the context of the chapter outlining Robert’s theory, we analyzed how the two novels conform thematically regarding 1) space (the labyrinthine or vestibular geography and architecture); 2) questions and questing (the *Perceval* legend); and 3) preoccupations with bureaucracy. In the light of Blanchot’s writing on Kafka, the focus of the overlap between these two novels appears in a slightly altered form. We might choose four thematic concerns consistent in the two novels and relate them to Blanchot’s critical writings on 1) illness; 2) fatigue; 3) wandering; and 4) error.

**Sickness**

The illnesses that fall upon the characters of these novels are not necessarily diagnosable. The symptoms are real—they experience burning throats, fever, thirst, and a terrible fatigue. Though they are in physical pain, they are never diagnosed as having a particular ailment. The Soldier, while staying in the barracks, complains of “sa gorge brûlante” which renders him incapable of getting up and going “jusqu’à cette eau
infiniment lointaine et problématique.”28 The fact that this water, an object that may cure his symptoms and offer him relief, is so far away makes us think of the writer’s predicament as Blanchot formulates—the writer is cast into the desert, forced to wander “loin d’ici” where no respite can be found.

Though ill throughout the tale, the Soldier’s physical constitution worsens, presumably after being shot where a “douleur lui a traversé le côté.” In a rare case of cause and effect, this “douleur très violente mais non pas insupportable”29 has a series of consequences. He faints,30 experiences once again a sort of delirium where he is unable to recognize the “visages blêmes,”31 and is surprised to see that “l’hôpital n’est qu’un bâtiment militaire de construction classique.”32 His symptoms grow worse, he experiences, once more, a terrible thirst, a sort of paralysis,33 which mirrors the earlier scene in the barracks, only now there is a cause: “Ce doit être aussi la piqûre qui donne au soldat cette nausée qu’il ressent depuis son réveil. Il a soif ; mais il n’a pas envie de se lever pour aller boire au robinet.”34 Though these symptoms could be nothing more than a dream, he soon dies,35 after which “reviennent des scènes encore moins claires.”36

The Soldier’s illness is both mysterious and concrete. The reader believes that he has been shot but this is not literally clear. Throughout the novel he has been sick and fatigued and this pain in his side, presumably a wound inflicted by the enemy soldiers’

28 Ibid., 121.
29 Ibid., 170.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 179.
32 Ibid., 184.
33 Ibid., 193.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 197.
36 Ibid., 202.
firing a machine gun, is not necessarily a gunshot. It could be related to a still earlier sickness, which itself was not fully defined. It must also be noted that the Soldier of *Dans le labyrinthe* appears to be the only ill figure in the novel. The other characters may be poor, thin, wary of foreigners and distrustful, but they seem to be in full possession of their health. Even the invalid is amazingly agile in the snow and capable of great feats of stamina. The Soldier is a pariah, a germ of sorts who, once present in the city, disrupts the healthy functioning of the municipality.

Thomas, in *Aminadab*, on the other hand, enters a world full of illness and it is only inevitable that he will succumb to the mysterious maladies that afflict the boarding house. Thomas appears on the scene of the novel *ex nihilo*—with no past, no family, and no last name—a mirror image of K. The very first face that Thomas sees, in the boutique across the street from the *maison*, is “doux et fièvreux.” It is merely a matter of time before sickness of one kind or another reaches Thomas. After his wanderings in the house, Thomas complains of his thirst, his fatigue, and “Il se mordait les lèvres, il ne pouvait dissimuler sa nervosité, peut-être était-il malade.” The doubt that shades his possible sickness soon disappears when he faints. From this point on, his sickness is incontrovertible. After the loss of “toute sa raison, on dut l’enfermer dans l’infirmerie spéciale.” It is notable that the loss of his reason sends him to the sickroom, as if one’s mental and physical health are linked, a theme we see repeated in the novel.

In the boardinghouse of *Aminadab*, sickness is omnipresent. An entire floor is devoted to a special hospital or “infirmerie,” which the boarders regard with abject horror.

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38 Ibid., 77.
39 Ibid., 116.
for the very simple reason that “Tous les malades seront perdus.” 40 When Thomas encounters the employees they seem ill, with an “air maladif.”41 Later, after a visit to the sick ward, Thomas cannot help but observe how “les têtes qu’il apercevait semblaient rongées par la maladie.”42 Barbe, one of his guides, complains that in the organizing and running of the house, “Avec les maladies on n’a jamais fini.”43 Illness even plays an important role in the mythologies which surround the governing of the house:

Il était scandaleux de voir ces êtres [the sick], échauffés et paralysés, faire des efforts ridicules pour quitter leur lit et chercher à exprimer les mille sottises qu’agitait leur esprit affaibli. Naturellement, ces malades ont vu leur état empirer et ils sont tombés dans le repos inaltérable et incompréhensible, d’ailleurs inquiétant, où les faux commandements de la loi ne peuvent plus les atteindre.44

This passage is particularly enlightening not so much because it describes Thomas’ situation—it is instead addressing past cases and mythological occurrences—its import comes from its linking of sickness to paralysis (as we saw in the case of the Soldier), to madness (l’esprit affaibli), and to fatigue (repos). These three tropes, we shall see, are important aspects unifying the sickness, fatigue, and error of Aminadab and Dans le labyrinthe to Kafka’s own novels.

The appropriation of illness reflects not only Kafka’s own biography—he was a supposed hypochondriac who ultimately died from tuberculosis of the throat—but it has strong ties to Blanchot’s own life and his treatment of Kafka’s writing. An early surgery instilled in the young Blanchot a life-long belief that he survived his own death an event

40 Ibid., 191.
41 Ibid., 83.
42 Ibid., 172.
43 Ibid., 66.
44 Ibid., 157.
which he relived during the Occupation and wrote about in *L’Instant de ma mort* (1994).

Blanchot relates these concerns to Kafka in a telling passage from *L’Écriture du désastre*.

> Quand Kafka laisse entendre à un ami qu’il écrit parce que, autrement, il deviendrait fou, il sait qu’écrire est déjà folie, est sa folie, sorte de vieille hors conscience, insomnie. Folie contre folie : mais il croit qu’il maîtrise l’une en s’y abandonnant ; l’autre lui fait peur, est sa peur, passe à travers lui, le déchire, l’exalte, comme s’il lui fallait subir toute la puissance d’une continuité dont il parle avec effroi et non sans un sentiment de gloire. C’est que la gloire est le désastre.  

The madness of writing is linked to a sickness of the soul, but also a sickness of words. As we noted in our discussion of Blanchot’s treatment of language, he wants to distance himself from “la maladie des mots” and instead focus on “la santé des mots.”

But this discussion entails a sort of binary of which Blanchot was always critical. Instead, we may note the fear, a psychological malaise, which penetrates the treatment of Kafka in this passage. The illness which infests the Soldier and Thomas in addition to being physical is a psychological and linguistic malaise which may, in fact, be expressed metaphorically through their incommunicability.

Sickness, speech, and madness form a tripartite expression of ambiguity, which concretizes around the absence of health and the absence of cause and effect. In tandem with the sickness of the characters we are also aware of their fatigue, but we do not know if the reason for these characters’ fatigue is their wondering of if they are ill and thus fatigued or, lastly, if they are fatigued and thus susceptible to illness. The fatigue is exacerbated by the wandering of the character. We see in the relationship of the three elements to one another no logical progression, no clear path of cause and effect. The ambiguity will finally be enriched by the semantic overlap of *errer / erreur.*

The breakdown of cause and effect, the sickness of the characters and their strained relationship to language may lead one to mistake the characters’ illness and error for madness. Some commentators attribute madness to both K. and Don Quixote, and Blanchot addresses this notion in a passage from *l’Écriture du désastre*:

> Il est étrange que K., à la fin du *Château*, ait été par certains commentateurs promis à la folie. Dès le début, il est hors du débat raison-déraison … De même, il ne paraît pas possible qu’il meure (damné ou sauvé, c’est presque sans importance), non seulement parce que son combat ne s’inscrit pas dans les termes de vivre et de mourir, mais parce qu’il est *trop fatigué* (sa fatigue, seul trait qui s’accentue avec le récit) pour pouvoir mourir : pour que l’avènement de sa mort ne se change en inavènement interminable.\(^{46}\)

Blanchot, in this fragment, is distancing the discourse of Kafka’s “lesson” from one of madness to one of fatigue. Whereas madness implies a number of binaries, saved or damned, dead or alive, reason and unreason (irrationality), Blanchot’s fragment highlights a fatigue which surpasses any of these oppositions. His fatigue is beyond sanity, life, death, or even the possibility of death. Let us examine how *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab* both tap into this thematic of fatigue.

**Fatigue**

Owing to the fact that, in these novels, cause and effect are not necessarily related, the relationship between illness and fatigue is rendered ambiguous. Is the character fatigued to this point because of his illness or has his fatigue left him susceptible to new illnesses? As we saw in *Dans le labyrinthe*, the character’s fatigue is never relieved because he is also an insomniac—he endures an indomitable fatigue and yet when he attempts to sleep he reaches “l’autre rive,” to reattribute a Blanchodian

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notion. Blanchot relates both fatigue and insomnia to writing in an aphoristic fragment from *L'Écriture du désastre*: “L’écrivain, l’insomniaque du jour.”

In *Dans le labyrinthe*, the Soldier slavishly pursues his goal even though his fatigue becomes more of an obstacle to overcome. He attempts to sleep on several occasions but sleep evades him. In the barracks, for instance, “l’homme ne dort pas: ses yeux sont grand ouverts.” This restlessness is surprising because when any citizen of the city encounters the Soldier, they always notice his fatigue. A woman notices “un visage inexpressif, aux traits creusés par la fatigue.” He is worn out but unable to sleep.

The description of Thomas, a sick wanderer in the boarding house, is consistent with this idea of sleeplessness. In the very first pages of the novel, the reader is aware of Thomas’ awkward relationship to sleep: “il n’avait nulle envie de dormir, mais il se reposait dans un sentiment de calme qui lui tenait lieu de sommeil et qui l’emportait loin d’ici.” At times he has no need for sleep, but still finds himself reposing in a mimicry of sleep. On the same page, in seeming contradiction to the previous account of his need for sleep, “il ressentit une grande nostalgie, mais bientôt la fatigue fut la plus grande et il tomba dans le sommeil.” It is noteworthy that a certain violence is at hand in his relation to sleep. He does not succeed in “s’endormir” but rather “tomber dans le sommeil” as if he has passed out, a violent reaction of the body against the conscious thinking or nostalgia that the mind was pursuing.

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47 Ibid., 185.
48 Robbe-Grillet, *Dans le labyrinthe*, 105.
49 Ibid., 113.
51 Ibid.
After these introductory passages establish Thomas’ status as a sleep-deprived character, or at least a figure at odds with sleep, the employees and boarders of the house begin to comment on Thomas’ apparent fatiguer. Thomas is told “c’est encore du repos qu’il vous faut,”\(^{52}\) as if to indicate that he has not been sleeping. Later he is approached and questioned (questions which verges on reproaches) “—Êtes-vous si fatigué ? Ne pouvez-vous pas rester quelques instants sans détourner les yeux ?”\(^{53}\) The criticism leveled at Thomas seems cruel, for the architecture of the house—its darkened spaces and endless halls and stairs—would exhaust even the sturdiest of characters. It is no wonder that he moves around as if sleep walking, just as it is no wonder that he would fall sick. In fact, his sicknesses are preceded by faints and upon regaining consciousness, he feels neither healthy nor rested. After his stay in the infirmary, “Il éprouvait à nouveau de la fatigue,”\(^{54}\) and this expression sounds like a leitmotif throughout the entirety of the novel. This fatigue is never relieved and we would understand why Thomas would want to believe Lucie when she promises him that “Ni le silence ni la nuit ni le repos ne s’opposent à notre amitié et nous trouverons dans cette chambre un endroit favorable au sommeil.”\(^{55}\) We understand why he would want to believe this, but we also recognize the emptiness of the promise. No sleep no rest will visit Thomas; upon the conclusion of the novel, as night is falling and “ses mains s’ouvrirent timidement et tâtonnèrent dans la nuit,”\(^{56}\) we quickly understand that he is in for a long night. He expects that the answer to

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52 Ibid., 27.
53 Ibid., 28.
54 Ibid., 201.
55 Ibid., 257.
56 Ibid., 289-90.
his question “—qui êtes-vous?” will allow him “de tout tirer au clair,” but the reader suspects that no answer is forthcoming, and that instead he will pass the night awake and restless with no new knowledge and no answers to his dire need to know.

The night is both a source of terror but also a source for thought, for writing, for experiencing the outside. Blanchot, in another fragment in L’Écriture du désastre, refers to The Castle and K.’s fatigue while at the same time offering an altered understanding of the novel and the writer’s work: “Dans la nuit, l’insomnie est dis-cussion, non pas travail d’arguments se heurtant à des arguments, mais l’extrême secousse sans pensées, l’ébranlement cassé jusqu’au calme (les exégèses qui vont et viennent dans « Le Château », récit de l’insomnie).” If insomnia is a sort of communicative illness, an exegetical disease leaving commentary as at best a placebo and at worst a misdiagnosis, then insomnia can be equated to the introduction of the neutre into the work. The pun on discussion is not only relatable to discourse but also the absence or refusal of a “coussin,” a pillow or cushion. Thrown out from sleep, barred from thought, the insomniac (fictional writer) eventually finds calm in the exegetical flux or wandering. Blanchot, in this fragment, written two decades after “Le Pont de bois,” is complicating his earlier statement about K. in The Castle. In addition to wandering “de l’exégèse à l’exégèse,” the book is now also a “récit de l’insomnie.” The collapsing of the tropes of insomnia and wandering, described by Blanchot in reference to The Castle are also evident in Aminadab and Dans le labyrinthe. The fatigue is exacerbated not only by sickness but

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57 Ibid., 290.
58 Blanchot, L’Ecriture du désastre, 83.
also by a character’s ambulatory existence; a fatigue of this nature clouds one’s reason and judgment, leading one to “errer.”

“Errer”

Blanchot insists upon the verb errer in his critical writings on Kafka, referring explicitly to the slippery nature of criticism of Kafka’s work as well as the way in which K., in The Castle, “erre” from one explanation to another. In this case and elsewhere in Blanchot’s writing the verb “errer” has a double meaning: to wander and to make mistakes. What other critics have deemed madness or “folie” Blanchot recasts as errancy, linked thematically to insomnia. The writer like the character wanders ceaselessly, never sleeping, visiting places but also committing unceasing errors.

In Kafka’s novels, just like in Dans le labyrinthe and Aminadab, one cannot avoid the pervasiveness of error. Karl Rossman’s every assumption in America is eventually turned on its ear. Joseph K. in The Trial is mistaken in nearly every component of his trial, crime, and reaction to the accusations. K. in The Castle is erroneous regarding the traditions, behaviors, and actions to take regarding society in the Castle village. Like these novels by Kafka, in Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet’s work error stretches to being wrong both in one’s decisions and in one’s assumptions.

In Dans le labyrinthe the nature of the error is twofold: 1) not knowing the street name and 2) becoming progressively more lost. Not knowing, for the Soldier, forces him to wander, which fatigues him and worsens his illnesses. Mistaking (se tromper) and wandering (errer) are explicitly united in the Soldier’s stressful sojourns in the snow: “il ne connaissait pas la ville. Il a pu se tromper d’endroit…Il avait mal entendu, ou mal
retrouvé, le nom des rues” after which “il a erré dans tout le quartier.” What is remarkable in this passage is the easy progression from not knowing to making a mistake. This last verb (se tromper) then loses stability to encompass the notions of having misheard or mis-remembered, allowing for the entrance of the trope of auto culpability, a concept that even the casual reader of Kafka would recognize as a trademark motif.

Kafka’s own work, elegantly blending error with errancy, has further similarities to these novels. The novels are structured following a double récit. For instance, in The Castle the reader follows K.’s actions which is one récit, and then learns along with K. the mysterious workings of the Law and the Castle bureaucracy which serves as second ongoing récit. In Aminadab, a similar structure allows for the reader to follow Thomas through the house as well as learn of the labyrinthine mythologies and legends that conceal the house in a fog of textuality. In Dans le labyrinthe, one of the parallel structures follows the wanderings of the Soldier and in the second, the reader witnesses the struggles of the writer. It is in this second récit of Dans le labyrinthe where another layer of error enters into play.

The figure who is telling the tale in Dans le labyrinthe makes many mistakes through the telling. In narrating the child’s reaction to the Soldier’s incommunicative grunting, the narrator quickly becomes aware of his mistake and interrupts the description with a curt “Non,” before explaining his error. “Ce n’est pas l’enfant, car il disparaît au contraire, remplacé par la jeune femme.” A similar instance of mistaken description appears where the narrator once again interrupts himself and explains his error, this time

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59 Robbe-Grillet, Dans le labyrinthe, 208.  
60 Ibid., 82.
dissolving into a tantrum of nos. “Non. Au-dessus de la commode une gravure encadrée de bois noir est fixée … Non. Non. Non.” 61 In a still more discomfiting instance, a paragraph break begins with a “Non.” In this case, we do not know what the exact mistake is: could it be the entire narrated segment that precedes it, containing 35 pages of narration? Could it be the entire book? The answer is terribly vague, because all the reader learns is “C’était autre chose.” 62

The otherness that accompanies error is an important point. Traditionally, if one is mistaken it means that something or something else is correct, and yet this assumption is pushed to its logical limits. In the maze of Kafkaesque administration, in the maze of streets of Dans le labyrinthe and in the maze of rooms of Aminadab, the reader quickly learns that there is no “other thing.” Having inherited a nightmare logic from Kafka, these novels exhibit a frustrating and aporetic approach to decision making. If we imagine a situation in these novels where a character must choose between A and B, if the character chooses A, we learn that he has made a mistake, but we quickly learn that had he chosen B, he would also have been mistaken. As such, reduced to an existence composed entirely of mistakes and fault, the characters are left no recourse but to wander rhetorically between erroneous explanations which is demonstrated in the novel by their being told constantly that they are wrong all the while wandering through a town in the case of Robbe-Grillet or a maison in the case of Blanchot.

The confluence of these two forms of error is seen on nearly every page of Aminadab. From the very beginning of Thomas’ adventure, it seems everything could

61 Ibid., 96. (A similar instance can be found on the following page of the novel.)
62 Ibid., 160.
have been avoided because “il n’avait qu’à continuer sa route,” and yet, on the very first page, refusing to follow his path, he chooses (mistakenly) to enter the house at which point all of his errors (erreurs / errer) commence. His mistake in entering the house is made clear much later in the novel when he is told quite simply, “Vous êtes ici en fraude.” Once inside the house, he is told, early and often, “Vous vous êtes trompé de chemin.” Of course, Thomas is stubborn and does not believe this early warning but it is repeated with irritating frequency. His decisions related to movement are likewise misconceived. In attempting to cross the game-room to reach a separate part of the house, the players scold him, but simultaneously seek to counsel him: “Ne faites-vous pas erreur ? Au début on se trompe presque toujours, on croit n’avoir qu’un désir, s’en aller au plus vite. Mais la vérité est toute différente.” Thomas’ error is not only in choosing to cross the room, it is also his desire to go at top speed, or to leave as soon as possible. As such, and with no ambiguity, Thomas’ error and wanderings are linked.

And yet, it seems as though his mistaken mission often overshadows his wanderings—limited as they are to a single house. Even his attempts to learn how the house functions are greeted with a deriding “Quelle tragique erreur !” At one point, Thomas, perhaps in defiance, lashes out at the employees of the house, exclaiming, “Vous commettez certainement une erreur,” but it is in fact he who is wrong, as he later acknowledges with a short, defeated phrase, giving in to the fact that it is “moi qui suis

63 Blanchot, Aminadab, 9.
64 Ibid., 240.
65 Ibid., 70.
66 Ibid., 77.
67 Ibid., 113.
68 Ibid., 162.
dans l’erreur.”

Even as Thomas admits to his mistake, his paradoxical position never resolves itself. He knows he is mistaken but can do nothing to prevent future errors. Even after his confession he is again reminded, “vous vous perdez dans les illusions;” it is not bad enough that he is wrong in the first place, but even they way in which he recognizes his error is also wrong.

This paradox cannot be avoided or resolved. Thomas knows he is wrong, attempts to reconcile his error, and as such, falls into error anew. Barbe orders him: “Ne commets pas une dernière erreur,” and Thomas responds naturally “–Quelle erreur commetrais-je donc ?” No answer is provided. We arrive at a limit in the text, a point beyond which no answers can be given, no explanation afforded. We are, it seems, outside.

The outside appears consistently in the novel, if not in the same way as we noted in *Dans le labyrinthe*. In an early scene, Thomas enters the house and perceives the rooms, hallways, and paintings; we notice a striking unity of thematics: insomnia, errance, and outsideness. “Dans son insomnie, il n’avait rien d’autre à faire que de regarder autour de lui machinalement, laissant ses yeux errer, et il lui semblait que ce qu’il voyaient n’était pas de la nature des choses visibles. Tout était si lointain, si extérieur !” The character, the self in this case, is exposed to phenomena beyond understanding and normal experience, but this is not just a fantastic description; the self, as Blanchot has in his criticism, is exposed to the outside, and is just now commencing

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69 Ibid., 206.
70 Ibid., 211.
71 Ibid., 279.
72 Ibid., 35.
his wanderings in the desert. This desert—though absent sand and sun—is infinite, even if that infinity seems limited. The house of Aminadab is composed of a path and

Le chemin était bien le même. Il [Thomas] regarda quelque portes — elles s’ouvraient toutes sur le côté droit — sans avoir le désir d’entrer. Mieux valait encore sa propre chambre et, du moment qu’il était décidé à n’y revenir que par force, il ne lui restait qu’à errer dans le corridor jusqu’à ce que la fatigue le fit tomber.⁷³

Once more we see the union of wandering and fatigue, which mirrors Kafka’s phrase that Blanchot uses as his incipit into his essay on the neutre: “Les forces de la vie ne suffisent que jusqu’à un certain point…” Beyond this point, we would like to believe, lies something (understanding, rest, even death), but this point that we seek is only illusory. A work (in this case the house) calls for commentary and explanation, yet exhausts explanations and knowledge—there is no outside where certainty and knowledge reside. The text (and the commentary that it evokes) is like the house which both encourages and impedes wandering owing to its “Voies qui ne menaient nulle part”⁷⁴

As final rhetorical flourish, Thomas himself comes from the outside, a foreign land. He arrives at the house from far away, with no history and no identity. As such, Jérôme, an employee of the house, can reproach Thomas: “N’êtes-vous pas étranger ? N’êtes-vous pas encore si éloigné que j’ai peine parfois à vous croire présent et que je dois me dire : « il est là » pour continuer mon récit ?”⁷⁵ Thomas is a stranger, reflective of the je who has been deprived of the right to say je and henceforth signaled by the ambiguous and neutre il. Where is il? Il est là. Where is là? Loin d’ici.

⁷³ Ibid., 63.
⁷⁴ Ibid., 173.
⁷⁵ Ibid., 144.
Part Three: The ways of patience

In Blanchot’s fiction more dimensions are added to the errancy of the character: the difficulty of interpretation (a sort of wandering among meanings or a meandering in the desert of no-meaning), the goals at the end of the errancy, and the patience requisite to see the project through to its end. In the case of Thomas in Aminadab, these thematic elements are actually absences in the character—there is no end to his path, he is perpetually wrong in his interpretations and explanations, and he lacks the patience to wait for important landmarks in his quest—he is, in fact, almost entirely impatient.

Similarly to what we find in The Castle, in Aminadab we may distinguish two layers of narration—as we earlier noted, and this layering is also similar in structure to Dans le labyrinthe. On one level we see the peregrinations of Thomas and on a second level, embedded in his tale is the telling of the elaborate mythology (exegesis) of the house. For the most part we have been focusing on Thomas’ existence, which, like the Soldier’s in Dans le labyrinthe, is a wandering existence. Not only is Thomas perpetually in motion, walking from floor to floor, drifting from room to room, lost in a nightmarish architectural construction lacking direction and end, Thomas is also deprived of origins. With no beginning and no veritable end, he seems, as a literary construct, to lack structure, coherence, and form (inachèvement). Where is Thomas from? Loin d’ici, as Blanchot writes in “Kafka et l’exigence de l’œuvre.” He is a foreigner and the customs of his mysterious native land are incompatible with those of the house. Though both figures, the Soldier and Thomas, are foreigners to the narrative locale that they are visiting, a distinction can be drawn. The soldier, who comes to “here/ ici” is “here” for a reason, to
deliver the _boîte_ to his comrade’s family. Thomas, a solitary voyager or perhaps pilgrim (since he travels by foot) is only passing through the street and comes to the house entirely by accident. The Soldier’s path has a goal at the end of it, a concrete objective. We might imagine that were the soldier to find his comrade’s family and deliver the package, the story would (or at least could) end—allowing, of course, for a new story to be told of how or if he returns to his outfit, but such supposition is antithetical to the nature of _Dans le labyrinthe_.

In _Aminadab_, no such brief conditional phrase could be imagined. Thomas’ goal, insofar as it may be surmised, is to reach the upper levels of the house to meet a girl (or couple) who he believes waved at him when he stood in the street. This very modest goal is complicated by two obstacles: 1) the idea that the top floors are entirely empty, as Barbe and Dom tell him to no end, and 2) the rumor that the hand signal never happened and was, possibly, a figment of Thomas’ imagination. What complicates Thomas’ goal beyond resolution is the fact that Thomas should have all along been questing to reach the subterranean chambers, not the upper floors. If these two conditions are true—and nothing can be assumed to be entirely true in the narrative world of _Aminadab_—then Thomas’ self-imposed goal is proven to be entirely false. This error in his judgment is repeated continually throughout the text. Perhaps even more so than Robbe-Grillet’s Soldier, the character’s _erreur_ (mistake) seems to trump or overshadow his _errance_.

A character who is mistaken in his every assumption and in his every conclusion recalls Kafka’s K. from _The Castle_. In “Le Pont de bois,” Blanchot describes how K. “erre d’une exégèse à une autre,” of course this _erre_ is meant to be ambiguous. He does
run from one explanation to the next, but each explanation is, in and of itself, wrong. This is indeed the way *The Castle* is designed in both Blanchot’s and Robert’s critical judgment, as a palimpsest structure. *Aminadab* is clearly a part of the same tradition. Not only because of Thomas’ incorrect interpretations, but also due to the prevalence of writing and imagery as palimpsests, such as maps overlaying more ancient sketches, drawings, tattoos, legends and mythologies that exponentially accumulate.\(^76\)

In both Robert’s and Blanchot’s reading of Kafka, the characters of *The Castle* belong to a sort of “bibliothèque universelle,” existing as palimpsest figures superimposed on top of literary history. In *Aminadab*, we see a more literal illustration of this concept as the text exhibits images which lay atop a surface that already has an image or meaning. The paintings which Thomas encounters (themselves echoes of Kafka-like paintings from *The Trial*) are darkened canvases which exhibit sketches superimposed on top of still more ancient sketches. “C’était un portrait dont la valeur artistique n’était pas grande et qui avait été peint sur une toile où l’on voyait encore les restes d’un autre tableau.”\(^77\) Architecturally, the house also displays attributes consistent with this theme: “un second escalier ne semblait que le reflet du premier.”\(^78\) The map of the house, like the physical architecture, is described as a *mise-en-abîme*. The blueprint is indecipherable since “c’était une grande feuille transparente où l’on avait dessiné grossièrement le plan de la maison.”\(^79\) Finally the facial tattoos of Dom complicate the very surface of his face. “Quant au visage, ce qu’il avait pris pour des boursoufflures et des cicatrices était les

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\(^76\) Another case of the palimpsest trope, and one reflective of Kafka, is how the endless legends and myths that mirror the endless task and nature of commentary.

\(^77\) Blanchot, *Aminadab*, 10.

\(^78\) Ibid., 71.

\(^79\) Ibid.. 81.
traces d’une deuxième figure qu’un tatoueur avait dessinée.”

In this case, even faces require some level of artistic interpretation and commentary to explain. The face tattoo, however, is complicated further because “ce second ne se superposait pas au premier, loin de là. Si l’on considérait le détenu de face, on ne voyait que les traits grossièrement façonnés, mais en tournant la tête rapidement de gauche à droit…on distinguait des traits pleins de finesse qui étaient comme le reflet d’une beauté ancienne.” The face, though not an exact replica, is laid upon a face which reflects an ancient beauty; we are reminded of the way that Blanchot and Robert both describe The Castle as being laid upon ancient literature, such as The Odyssey or Perceval.

With the profusion of images and texts superimposed on top of one another, it comes as no surprise that Thomas would sometimes draw a wrong conclusion. What is more surprising is that every conclusion he draws be wrong—not unlike K. The problematic of interpretation, analysed in “Le Pont de bois” and “Le Langage de fiction” is enriched in Aminadab because the very act of communication is likewise muddled. Even under the best of circumstances, a clear message may be difficult to interpret. In Aminadab, however, communication is rendered almost impossible to decipher. Words are mumbled, writing is scrawled so faintly or ornately that a text becomes illegible, paintings are drawn on top of other paintings to create a jumble where both the new and old are nothing more than blurred shadows. It is finally in the realm of speech that the true problems of communication and ultimately interpretation become apparent. When characters speak to Thomas, their voices are at times so booming that the noise deafens

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80 Ibid., 35.
81 Ibid. (Note, similarly to the blueprint, the inclusion of the adverb “grossièrement” as if this were done without care.)
the listener, leaving him unable to understand what words were addressed to him. At other times the speaker mumbles and only an indistinct murmuring—a sort of hollow, empty, wordless breathing—can be perceived by the ear.

Whereas in *Dans le labyrinthe* we examined the nature of voices, some examples of problematic speech include Thomas obstinately saying, “Puisque tu ne veux pas parler, je n’ai plus qu’à me taire,”82 petulantly bringing to a close all communication. In fact, the very use of words sometimes has a debilitating effect: “Ce n’était pas le sens des paroles qui le blessait, c’était les paroles mêmes qui le dégoûtaient.”83 It seems that the very functioning and foundation of speech is coming undone. On other occasions, however, meaning is interrupted not just because of the words, but by the tones and voices which pronounce the words. Thomas, we are told, “n’aurait pu comprendre ces paroles ; elles étaient dites sur un ton qui leur enlevait tout sens … quels mots douloureux ! Quelles paroles d’une continuelle détresse.”84 The incommunicability of the speech is linked to illness, in this case with the word distress. Thomas quickly learns the pointlessness of speech; he “ne put que montrer d’un geste combien toute conversation particulière était difficile.”85 This realisation comes after an earlier moment when “il se tut ; il avait parlé si vainement qu’il pouvait se demander si ses paroles avaient été réellement prononcées.”86 Speech is confused and accomplishes no purpose; when one does speak one is given no guarantees that one is making sense and that or that one’s meaning will be understood by an interlocutor.

82 Ibid., 38.
83 Ibid., 40.
84 Ibid., 42.
85 Ibid., 106.
86 Ibid., 46.
Another example of the problem of expression is provided by one of the legends of the house. A young man is relating a complicated story about former boarders and the administration of the house. Imbedded in his longer story, which began twenty pages earlier, he relates how “un homme, couché près de moi, fut envahi par un flot de paroles.” The word *envahi* stands out since it is with this same idea that Blanchot describes, in relation to Kafka, the writer in the desert. The writer does not write, so much as, like a prophet, he lets himself be invaded by words becoming a conduit for language. What the author writes, he does not necessarily understand and the reader or interlocutor is likewise barred from easy understanding. The man’s narrative continues:

*Ce qu’il me dit était presque incompréhensible et moi-même avais-je gardé la force de comprendre ? ... Les mots étaient aussi étrangers que s’ils avaient été jetés par hasard par une bouche informe. Je n’entendais rien, je ne voyais rien et les paroles retentissaient en moi avec une douloureuse sonorité, me mettant en contact avec une vérité que je repoussais. C’est pourtant ce récit qui m’est demeuré comme la seule explication réelle de ce grand drame.*

The troubling act of speech is reinforced by Blanchot’s description of voices, which can be seen to parallel Robbe-Grillet’s own obfuscation of voices. Like in *Dans le labyrinthe*, voices in *Aminadab* are never clear, confident, or purely instructive. They are, on the other hand, unctuous, coarse, dark, and slippery. In the game-room of the house, for instance, Thomas remarks that “C’était curieux, tout le monde pourtant chuchotait,” this whispering forms white noise, but what is even more surprising, given the fact that conversations are formally forbidden, is that “parfois de véritables cris sortaient de la

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87 Ibid., 133.
88 Ibid.
The volume and clarity of speaking vacillates between incomprehensible mumbling and shouting, both of which are impossible to understand. Even when one manages to convey words, the sum total of the words expressed makes very little sense—either to Thomas or to the reader. Three themes do, however, manage to make themselves understood: Thomas’ problems with interpretation, his perpetual error, and his distance from any specifiable goal or end.

Thomas is repeatedly told that everything that he perceives to be one way is in fact the opposite. Like K., his problem is a hermeneutic problem. These mistaken interpretations are reinforced by his error. Mistakes are his constant companions and the personnel of the house never cease to signal his many miscalculations. His greatest mistake, it would seem, reflecting K.’s error, is his ignorance of not only what his goal is but also the path (chemin) that is necessary to lead him to it. Told repeatedly that his goal is wrong, Thomas is forced to consider what path he is on and which one he should be following. Even in this scenario, he is reminded that his path is wrong: “Le vrai chemin ne se dirigeait pas vers les hauteurs mais s’enfonçait profondément sous le sol.”90 Instead of seeking the uppermost floors, he is informed (though he himself remains skeptical) that his true path (voie) should have been down, toward the cave-like basement. Blanchot indicates how the writer can do nothing more than “errer sans fin, d’aller jusqu’au bout de l’erreur…de transformer ce qui est un cheminement sans but dans la certitude du but sans chemin.”91 The ambiguity of goals and the pathways that lead to them becomes a dominating theme in Blanchot’s theory and fiction. Aminadab offers a clear illustration of

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89 Ibid., 83.
90 Ibid., 276.
91 Blanchot, L’Espace littéraire, 92.
how Thomas’ mission wavers back and forth between certainty and doubt and how both the way and the goal are embroiled in ambiguity.

At the very beginning, “il y avait aussi dans le lointain un pont et une rivière, et peut-être, mais cela devenait tout à fait vague, un chemin qui aboutissait à un paysage montagneux.”92 The rhetorical use of ‘maybe,’ ‘vague,’ and ‘faraway’ reinforces the distance of his goal. The boarders do not believe he knows where he is going and remain incredulous when Thomas tries to explain his plans. They ask him, “Où allez-vous?”93 and at the beginning Thomas, when seeking a room, is even assured by his interlocutor that “vous êtes sur le bon chemin, car c’est moi qui suis chargé des locations.”94 Thomas passes from being on the right path to losing his path, a result that is unavoidable given that “le chemin était incroyablement compliqué. Il fallait passer à travers des cordages, enjamber des bancs, revenir en arrière … Il semblait que le voyage ne se terminerait jamais.”95 This passage highlights how complicated it is to navigate the house, but it also introduces the idea of an end, an end which, though a limit, seems to be unreachable. In addition to the house’s architecture contributing to Thomas’ problems finding the right path, the end of the day and the approach of the gloaming further frustrate his goals: “Sans doute il s’est trompé de chemin, mais la nuit transformait tout.”96

These themes become more intense as the novel approaches its end. “On eût dit que la maison cherche la liberté et l’insouciance par ces voies qui menaient nulle part et

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92 Blanchot, Aminadab, 10.
93 Ibid., 18.
94 Ibid., 18.
95 Ibid., 27.
96 Ibid., 100.
qui pourtant faisaient partie d’un plan rigoureux.”97 The belief implicit in this utterance is that the house itself is somehow exacting its will on the boarders but this belief is erroneous. It is not the house which forces one to act in only one way, it is not even the “plan” of the house, but rather it is as though all characters who enter the house are simultaneously fooled by the illusions that the house invokes. An example of this erroneousness is the instance when Thomas, in reference to a message he was expecting, explains to Barbe, “votre pensée était le seul chemin qui pût me permettre d’y parvenir.”98 On one hand, all paths seem to lead to the exact position in which the characters find themselves, leading one to believe that the house is a site of inescapable determinism, but at the same time, Thomas’ chronic mistakes lead the reader to assume that he is only where he is because of an accident, not because of the gross misapplication of fate or destiny. And yet, here he is where Barbe tells him “Votre route s’arrête ici.”99 Thomas thinks he can free himself from this deadend and expresses his belief that “la route que j’ai eu le tort de suivre, oui, dit Thomas; mais je vais chercher un nouveau chemin.”100 Thinking that he has broken out of this closed loop and exercised some ‘free will’ he is immediately contradicted by Barbe. “Il n’y a pas d’autre voie … toutes les issues sont fermées.”101 Disillusioned, Thomas loses his purpose. At first it was to climb to the top but he knew of no way to get there, now, absent the goal, he can only wander.

This cheminement is highlighted by a rhetorical device in the final quarter of the novel. Thomas has now been employed by the house after his illness. He is meant to

97 Ibid., 173.
98 Ibid., 196. (my emphasis).
99 Ibid., 207.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
clean a room and he undertakes this chore with some zeal, but, like his harried wandering in the house, in his cleaning “il s’éloignait de plus en plus du point de départ, et les cercles qu’il traçait étaient comme les différents chemins d’un labyrinthe qui n’avait pas d’issue.”\textsuperscript{102} He is further from his starting point but not closer to his goal, this phrase acts as a synecdoche of the story. Reinforcing ideas that are by this point redundant in the récit, a man tells Thomas that “vous aviez choisi un mauvais chemin.”\textsuperscript{103} It is at this time that Thomas learns that all of his efforts were not only vain, but totally preventable. His true path is in fact indicated to him by the house itself: “Pourtant la vraie voie était toute trace, elle était en pente douce et ne demandait ni effort ni consultation. De plus elle vous conduisait vers une région où vous auriez mené une existence qui en aurait valu la peine. Là, vraiment, vous étiez chez vous.”\textsuperscript{104} Where is this place, this là? Is it in the basement, the sous-sol? Getting there is easy, the house itself is tilted as if to make the going all the easier. Thomas has been wrong and his wanderings have been entirely futile.

\textbf{Voies}

In what amounts to a striking similarity with Robbe-Grillet’s novel, Blanchot, in writing \textit{Aminadab}, relies on voices (\textit{voix}) to confuse the way (\textit{voie}) to one’s goal. The homonym [vwa] is used to maximize the effect of confusion and effort in these novels. \textit{Voix}, in Blanchot’s critical writing, of course is not simply a narrating presence or the voice of the narrator, it is also a way—a pathway of language, a manner to speak outside the subject. The self, or I, losing its power to speak, speaks outside of itself, as \textit{il}. But this voice, coming in spite of language, is only a murmur. Indistinct, it is “rauque … obscure

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 234.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 268.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 269-270.
… lourde,” pained and ill. It presents doul
er without relieving it. In Aminadab, speech is composed of shouts, murmurs, whisperings and conversations but the adjectives that modify the speech almost always complicate understanding. Thomas hears, “Des cris aussi rauques, stridents et étouffés à la fois,”105 when he first enters the house. This sonority is hard to imagine and yet voices and cries only become more mutilated throughout the text. A woman “avait un accent de gravité et de tristesse qui ne permettait pas de croire tout ce qu’elle disait.”106 Other voices are encountered as “à peine distincte107 … gutturale et désagréable108 … onctueuse109 … grave, basse, venue de régions très éloignées.”110 At one point, the voice of Lucie even changes, making her almost unrecognizable to Thomas.111 We, as readers, are kept constantly at a distance from the characters (who are themselves distanced from themselves). We must force ourselves to see (voir) or find in this voix a voie if not of understanding then perhaps of the expression of our lack of understanding.

The interruptions in the processes of understanding and interpretation are designed necessarily to frustrate the reader’s expectations regarding the tenets of the novel. Like Robbe-Grillet’s novel, which appeared fifteen years later, and like The Castle which was first published in 1935 and translated into French in 1938, it seems that Blanchot’s does suggest an ethics of sorts. Several moral lessons appear and reappear, the most immediate of which seems to be a direct inheritance from Kafka: the virtue of

105 Ibid., 12-13.
106 Ibid., 17.
107 Ibid., 41.
108 Ibid., 56.
109 Ibid., 270.
110 Ibid., 86.
111 Ibid., 283.
patience. As Thomas is often chided for his many errors, it becomes clear that the cause of his errors is his impatience. Barbe is the most critical toward Thomas in this regard. Thomas, in trying to choose a room feels as though he is being pressured and complains, “—Je crois, dit-il, que vous me pressez un peu.”\footnote{Ibid., 21.} Unsure of the importance of his tasks, Thomas grows impatient with chores that he believes futile. As an example of harmless impatience, or what appears to be harmless at first blush: “Thomas suivit d’abord ce spectacle avec curiosité, puis il s’en détourna, il était impatient de reprendre l’entretien avec la jeune fille.”\footnote{Ibid., 59.} On the other hand, Thomas himself is treated with impatience by the workers of the house: “Où voulez-vous aller ? cria le gardien avec impatience.” It is of little surprise that Thomas “n’était pas sûr que ce fut une question; le ton était celui d’une menace encore incertaine.”\footnote{Ibid., 71.} Everything that is done to Thomas seems to prevent him from achieving his goal, and he clearly loses both his temper and patience. “Thomas constata avec impatience que son guide le poussait presque toujours à travers ces groupes de sorte qu’il s’ensuivait une confusion extraordinaire,”\footnote{Ibid., 78.} and later, in a crowd, when people try to move around him, “Thomas commença à perdre patience.”\footnote{Ibid., 84.}

Thomas and Barbe have a discussion from which the reader learns of his original error and the source of this error: impatience. Barbe chides Thomas for not keeping a rendez-vous, but Thomas never understood that one was arranged “Votre rendez-vous? dit Thomas. Voilà qui est surprenant. Avait-il été question de rendez-vous?”\footnote{Ibid., 203.} This
(falsely) innocent defense of Thomas provokes Barbes annoyance “C’est bien inutilement que je vous ai prié de m’attendre pour que nous puissions nous retrouver. Vous n’avez fait aucun cas de mon offre.” It is at this point that Barbe informs Thomas not only of his error but of the crucial lesson of which he failed to take note. She explains that “vous ne pouviez que vous égarer,” describing his wanderings which were caused by his mistake before elucidating the extent of his mistake,

C’était fatal. Ce que je vous avais demandé, et cette demande avait son prix mais vous n’avez pas voulu vous en apercevoir, c’était de m’attendre sans vous agiter vainement, sans chercher par vous-même ce que vous ne pouviez atteindre. Était-ce si difficile ? Vous n’aviez qu’à rester dans votre coin. Mais cela a probablement dépassé vos forces. Impatient comme vous l’êtes, vous avez préféré me suivre dans les chambres au risque de vous laisser absorber par ce que vous voyiez, et vous m’avez laissé partir en poursuivant votre chemin à votre guise.

The fatal error for Thomas, according to Barbe, is the same error that Alexandre Vialatte attributes to Joseph K. in the essay “La morale du Procès:” “Mais sa plus grande erreur—j’entends par là péché en même temps que faute de tactique —, c’est l’impatience.” Vialatte pursues this thought, referring to Kafka’s aphorisms that “All human errors are impatience, the premature breaking off of what is methodical,” and

There are two main human sins from which all the others derive: Impatience and indolence. It was because of impatience that they [presumably Adam and Eve] were expelled from Paradise; it is because of indolence that they do not return. Yet perhaps there is only one major sin: impatience. Because of impatience they were expelled, because of impatience they do not return.

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118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., (my emphases).
But everything is not impatience for Thomas. At the beginning he claims that he will wait “aussi longtemps qu’il le faudra”\(^{122}\) but he is not true to his word. Thomas acknowledges his error: “J’ai eu tort de ne pas vous attendre; il m’aurait peut-être fallu patienter longtemps; combien de temps ne me serais-je pas résigné à vivre sans autre espoir que celui de votre retour ! Mais je continue à croire que le mal n’était pas irréparable, il me semble même en partie réparé.”\(^{123}\) Thomas acknowledges his error, his impatience, and he appears contrite, but for the house, his *mea culpa* does not suffice. Patience as a lesson becomes more pronounced in the final 80 pages of the novel. In the midst of a long myth of the house, Barbe explains that “ce qui compte pour eux et renouvelle leurs forces, c’est qu’ils ont la preuve d’avoir trouvé dans la patience et la passivité le principe d’une action bienheureuse.”\(^{124}\) Blanchot, in his criticism, returns frequently to passivity and patience, and one may think that those who are speaking to Thomas in *Aminadab* are the mouthpieces of Blanchot’s theory.

Lucie counsels Thomas but promises him nothing easy: “—La nuit vient, dit celui-ci. Nous n’attendons plus que le moment d’allumer les lampes … nous pourrons considérer que la journée est terminée. *Un peu de patience*, c’est l’affaire de quelques instants.”\(^{125}\) We would like to think that Thomas has learned his lesson and toward the very end of the novel, a “jeune home” praises Thomas, saying “vous êtes patient.”\(^{126}\) Yet this man, too, seems to be in error because he had just criticized Thomas’ desire to flee

\(^{122}\) Blanchot, *Aminadab*, 22.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., 204.
\(^{124}\) Ibid., 223.
\(^{125}\) Ibid., 265, (my emphasis).
\(^{126}\) Ibid., 273.
responsibility. The young man is being duplicitous and perhaps flattering because, after his conversation with the man, Lucie pleads with Thomas to be patient. “Ne sois donc pas impatient; à ton appel, la nuit te rendra justice et tu perdras de vue tes peines et tes fatigues.” Told that soon all will be righted and that the night will reconcile all injustices, the reader thinks there is still hope for Thomas, but he is unable or unwilling to believe this proclamation. Thomas asks immediately if the lamps will be lit to greet this night. The woman says “naturellement non” and then to highlight the impatience of the question, she adds, “quelle sotte question! Tout s’enfoncera dans la nuit.”

Thomas’ impatience seems not only explainable but downright excusable to the reader. The fact that it is unforgiveable to the residents and personnel of the house, like the Law’s mistreatment of Joseph K. or the Castle’s coldly ignoring K., excites in the reader a feeling of despair or indignation; not just on account of the maddeningly dense organization of the house with its rules, regulations, and obscure customs, but even more essentially because of Thomas’ terrible solitude. Thomas’ impatience can be compared unfavorably to the Soldier’s seemingly infinite reserve of endurance, but the comparison appears reductive. How patient is the Soldier, really? Does his patience or impatience lead to any catastrophe, like Thomas’ or K.’s? However this question is answered, it must necessarily reflect two points: the first is that both novels begin by explicitly stating the solitude of the characters: “Je suis seul, ici, maintenant,” and “Il faisait grand jour.

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127 Ibid., 272.
128 Ibid., 286.
129 Ibid.
130 Robbe-Grillet, Dans le labyrinthe, 9.
Thomas qui jusque-là avait été seul;”\(^{131}\) secondly both novels conclude by questioning subjectivity—even if this act is done more overtly in Blanchot’s work.

“In un autre vous-même”

As Thomas’ adventure in the house draws to a close, he again meets Dom, the inhabitant who was previously chained to him. Thomas is told that all his “forces [ont] été dépensées en vain.”\(^{132}\) Thomas demands to know what he was missing, and the answer comes without hesitation: “De reconnaître votre voie, dit le jeune homme. J’avais été place auprès de vous pour vous éclairer, chaque fois que vous en auriez le désir. J’étais comme un autre vous-même.”\(^{133}\) Thomas’ path was always right in front of him. He was so obsessed with his goal that he lost sight of the path that led to it. This man, who was a pest to Thomas from the beginning, was always meant to be another self for Thomas, as though Thomas were battling himself all along. In this case, this “autre vous-même” is like the *je* which is transformed into the *il*. From the self comes the other, in the self is the other, beyond the self resides the other. We have addressed the self-reflexive nature of questioning in *Dans le labyrinthe* and we cannot ignore the role of questions in *Aminadab*. What is essential to *Aminadab*’s manner of questioning is the way that it both questions selfhood and displays a frightening dissolution of the self.

Thomas losing confidence in who he is both as a subjectivity and as a character reflects the character’s ignorance of who he is. Being becomes a preoccupation in the text, but in this instance Thomas is again mistaken. He thinks, in the very last instants of the novel, that by obtaining an answer to the question “qui êtes-vous?” which he pleads

\(^{131}\) Ibid.
\(^{132}\) Blanchot, *Aminadab*, 269.
\(^{133}\) Ibid.
“d’une voix tranquille et convaincue,”134 he will bring all mysteries to light. Thomas is wrong, nothing is brought to light, everything remains obscure. Even the question he asks is off-the-mark. How can Thomas ask “who are you” to a being calling itself another Thomas? This may be viewed as an illustration of Foucault’s understanding of the neutre, as a companion who is not present but who fills the void of the absent speaker. It is as if Thomas lost the ability to say I. The house has consumed his being, his self. The house becomes pure literature, and Thomas just one ego in a constellation of lives.

This observation brings to mind the Soldier’s troubling status as a fictive or imaginary figment of the unnamed subjectivity je who opens the telling of Dans le labyrinthe. Who is he? What does it mean that he is a soldier? What does it mean that he is a possible traitor? What does it mean that he dies at the end of the tale? What does it mean that the Soldier is a lonely figure and that Thomas, like the Soldier, “fut seul?” Those questions force us to reevaluate the je and the moi of Dans le labyrinthe, which, if we are to adhere to the critical writing of Blanchot, prods us to reflect on the solitary subjectivity of the author.

The writer must “s’éloigner de lui-même”135 and we see this distance fictionalized by both Robbe-Grillet and Blanchot. This distance is enhanced rhetorically by the thematic rendering of silence, emptiness, coldness, fatigue, illness, error, and wandering. Somehow we want to find in all of this opaque, unforgiving sterility some solid subject. But Blanchot’s reading of Kafka interrupts this desire. The author’s role, which we may romantically cast as a contradictory heroism, is to annihilate himself, to separate himself,

134 Ibid., 290.
135 Blanchot, De Kafka à Kafka, 272.
to cleave himself from himself, to detach his voice, to silence the je. This silenced self gives voice, in a way, to what Blanchot called “petits egos” and what Foucault calls “the companion.” The space between the speech and the speaker, the gap between language and the récit is where we seek a subjectivity which is dissolved, disintegrated, phantasmagoric. This may not be the goal of all literature, but it is how Blanchot treats Kafka and it perpetuates itself in Dans le labyrinthe and Aminadab, two novels sympathetic in tone, theme, and spirit to Kafka’s oeuvre.

The author, writes Blanchot, loses the power to say “I.” He is là où il n’est plus. He is someone who “pense donc il n’est pas.”136 Shorn from all community, deprived of all companionship, the author exiles himself to the desert, locks himself in a dusty room, wanders through impossible buildings. Not in the hopes of finding companionship to complete himself, not to give voice to his own ego (self), not to complete a goal, nor teach a lesson, but to be like a prophet, to let language speak through him. To create a goal, to follow a path, to express a way, even if erroneously. To compose and become passivity, to abandon je and to embrace (or to be embraced by) il. To allow himself to wander the desert. In his wanderings he pursues a certain patience tempered, as it is, by impatience that one day he may leave the desert, exit the dusty room, liberate himself from the nightmarish house and wander freely, peacefully, outside.

Chapter 5

Kafka’s Children: Language and the Self

In the preceding chapters, we have seen not only how Kafka is a constant presence in French letters of the twentieth century, but how integral he is to the writings of Blanchot, Robert, and Robbe-Grillet. As the argument has moved toward its conclusion we have discussed the thematic importance of questions regarding the self and subjectivity. In this concluding chapter, I will frame the discussion of the self into a larger discourse of subjectivity and language and relate it to the rhetorical trope of childhood, which we may consider as one final bond strengthening the relationship between Robert, Robbe-Grillet, Blanchot and Kafka.

On January 8, 1914, Kafka confided in his journal “What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe.” Kafka’s personal life, marked as it was by loneliness, separation, and literary struggle, offers a fertile narrative background against which it is

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2 Kafka, Diaries: 1914-1923, 11.
enlightening to raise questions of subjectivity and selfhood. Our discussion thus far, via Robert, Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet has highlighted such questions.

Chapter Four ended with observations about subjectivity in *Aminadab*. Thomas, in the concluding pages of this novel, is no longer sure about his own self, where it begins and where it ends. Dom claims to be “un autre vous-même,” and Thomas himself can be described as a disoriented and alienated subjectivity. A character who is distanced from himself reflects Blanchot’s own views on the writing process. The author no longer has the power to say I, and instead writes *il*. The fictional space is populated by subjectivities that are in a state of “non identification avec eux-mêmes,” deprived of subjectivity, depersonalized, and *neutre*. Instead of a strong character, certain of who he is, how he belongs to society, why he is where is, and what he needs to accomplish to complete a mission or a story, in *Aminadab* we have a character asking “qui êtes-vous,” which may be read as a refraction of the question “qui suis-je?” Where am I, why am I, who am I are all questions that are posed, and yet these questions are misleading because the subject of each of them, “I” lacks any stability, centralization, or definition.

*Je pense…*

Both in his fiction and criticism Blanchot seems to be discoursing with Descartes and the history of self and subjectivity which belongs to the history of philosophy from Descartes to the present. Before Descartes, as Seigel, Taylor, Martin and Barresi write, questions of selfhood and subjectivity belonged to the soul. With Descartes, the focus shifts to the question of consciousness, certainty, and knowledge in the framework of an individual subjectivity: I think, therefore I am. In a world where everything can be
doubted, Descartes sought a truth which was beyond doubt, beyond questioning. Allowing for our senses to betray us, allowing for a “génie malin” to fool us, allowing for all manner of trickery and chicanery, Descartes finally discerned that the only thing that is absolutely beyond doubt is that I am doubting. A doubting subject cannot doubt that it is doubting, thus that I think is proof that I exist. This one precept was beyond doubt and a foundation for knowledge.

From this conclusion, Descartes formulates a dualistic system based on mind / body, subject / object, interior / exterior. It is the mind, the subject, the internal, which is placed in a privileged position to the body, the object, the outside. From a position of interiority, the subject can construct the world and perceive the truth of all the objects that surround him. Robert Solomon outlines three categories for what he calls the “transcendental pretence” of the ego, self, or subject, namely that it is universal, singular, and autonomous. Historians of the self generally agree that it is Descartes who is responsible for promoting the I as the focal point of philosophy and knowledge. After Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel all elaborated and added nuance to Descartes’ position without fundamentally altering the basic notion of interiority.

It was Nietzsche who, according to Sarah Kofman in “Descartes Entrapped,” delivered a crushing indictment of the Cartesian model. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche rails against certainty (why is this of all ideas valued?), cause and effect, and finally the I, which he considers little more than a grammatical phantom, a place holder, or shifter (in the language of Lacan): “Why do I believe in cause and effect? What gives me the right to speak of an “I”, and even of an “I” as cause, and finally of an “I” as cause
of thought?" Kofman outlines Nietzsche’s argument, relating it to contemporary theories of language, and Karlis Racevskis notes that Nietzsche’s critique of Descartes was to be taken up by others; as a result,

If there is one thing Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida have each taught us it is that the traditional epistemologically centred demarcation of the subject’s relation to the world in which knowledge (especially perceptual) provides the guiding thread, is fatally undercut by the linguistic character of our being.

That our being and our perception of reality are tempered by language is a central component to the writings of, above all, Foucault and Lacan. Racevskis writes in the first chapter of *Michel Foucault and the Subversion of Intellect* that “one of Foucault’s most evident aims … has been to dismantle the transcendence of the ego,” and he does his dismantling through a study of how language shapes the subject. According to Foucault, the subject is not the autonomous figure that Descartes and his tradition supposed it to be. The subject, a grammatical actor, is also acted upon by language, culture, history, and social conditions (what Bourdieu calls *habitus*). The subject is at the same time subjugated, it is acted upon by forces beyond its control, forces that condition its capacity to perceive, understand, and ultimately think. Racevskis, in a different article, summarizes Foucault’s project: “Instead of turning thought inward toward an ever renewed confirmation of its validity, Foucault wishes to direct it to the otherness of the pure being of language, a language devoid of sense.”

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4 Racevskis, Karlis, “The Decentered Subject of Christian Oster's Novels” in *A Living Legacy: CCNY Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures Undergraduate Alumni Conference*, ed. Bettina Lerner and Juan Carlos Mercado (Newark, Delaware: Juan de la Cuesta, 2007), 150.
That thought is conditioned by language can be seen in the writings of Jacques Lacan. Lacan is perhaps cited most frequently for his formula that the unconscious is structured like language. Language predates the birth of the subject and will outlive the subject; as such, “it is the Symbolic dimension opened up by language that allows a subject to be constituted, yet keeps him from ever uniting his identity with his being.”

The subject’s unique dependence on language results in division and alienation.

The Lacanian subject no longer finds his truth in a cogito because he sees himself dispersed by a field of signifiers that found his certitude but also make it dependent on a dimension that escapes him. To put it simply, Lacan transposes the Cartesian subject from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, from the realm of conscious certitude to that of intersubjective relations.

Lacan’s view of language as one that precedes the subject and essentially speaks through the subject (or speaks the subject) relates to Foucault’s notion of the author whereby “the subject is indeed present in the totality of the book, but he is the anonymous ‘on’ that speaks today in everything that is said.” In these views of language, we can clearly see Blanchot’s notion of language and the position of the author. Writing is impersonal, the author loses his power to say je and an impersonal voice speaks through the text, il.

Blanchot refers to this form of writing as a wandering in the desert, as exile, and like a conduit, similar to the way a prophet is the mouthpiece through which language speaks.

Blanchot’s descriptions of the writer fit into the same discursive field as does Foucault’s and Lacan’s. Further parallels exist between Blanchot and these thinkers.

Racevskis claims that Foucault’s writing has two purposes: to dissolve the subject and to...
fill the void with something new.\textsuperscript{10} The subject is figured as non-being (the presence of an absence, which we discussed in relation to Blanchot’s definition of language). According to Racevskis, in addition to the imaginary and the real, “The Symbolic dimension [language] introduces otherness, the presence of an absence, a third, mediating term that provides the element of cohesion essential for the formation of any cultural system.”\textsuperscript{11} Allowing for the subjugating, subjectifying presence of language, admitting its importance on the formation of a subject “can therefore be seen as corrective” since it allows for relativity and a questioning of the notion of truth. “It founds the subject’s existence in the context of a relation with the Other, not in the name of a Truth.” This forces the subject “to confront the reality of what is neither true nor false”\textsuperscript{12}

The flexibility in the subject’s relation to truth and falsehood allows for the multiplicity of meanings and interpretations which has been one of the leitmotifs of this project. What is more, as Racevskis outlines, it is one of the uniting characteristics of the new novelists as well as all those authors considered avant-garde (Beckett, Blanchot, the \textit{école de minuit}). These authors’ “discourse is often tentative, even vague, in its prolixity … it must necessarily be evocative rather than conclusive or authoritative.”\textsuperscript{13} Language evokes, rather than states. This formula is reminiscent of Blanchot’s own formula that literature presents rather than represents.

What we may glean from these definitions of language, as it shapes subjects as well as authors who offer such challenging and ambiguous works, is the very

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 39.
embodiment of decentered or deconstructed subjects. As we have illustrated in *Dans le labyrinthe* and *Aminadab*, characters are alienated, in conflict with themselves, and are in fact the presence of an absence. One is aware of what they are lacking more than what they possess. They are contradictions, lifeless sketches projected toward death. Phantoms who have experienced and outlived their own death. Figures who seem constantly to be struggling with the notion of singularity and interiority populate all of Blanchot’s work.

When Racevskis characterizes Foucault’s writing as criticizing western knowledge’s “instinctive turning away from the mysterious richness, disorder, and possible violence of discourse,” and expressing “a need to undermine the Cartesian ego, which has been the constituting force underlying the experience of subjectivity,” he is perhaps referring to Foucault’s *La Pensée du dehors*, a pamphlet devoted to his friend Blanchot. In *Thomas l’Obscur*, for instance, Thomas expresses his struggle with interiority and subjectivity rather explicitly: “J’aspire vertigineusement à me rejeter de moi.” In what is not the only pun in this text, Thomas both yearns and exhales to rid himself of the philosophically meddlesome notion of self.

**Obscurity**

Of Blanchot’s earliest novels: *Thomas L’Obscur* (1941/1950), *Aminadab* (1942), *Le Très Haut* (1948), and *L’Arrêt de mort* (1948), it is *Thomas L’Obscur* that bears the least resemblance to a Kafkaesque tradition. Steven Ungar, in his article “Night

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14 Ibid., 28.
15 Ibid., 29.
Blanchot, *Thomas L’Obscur*, 121.

17 First published in 1941 as “première version,” the text was abridged and metamorphosed by Blanchot and republished in 1950 as one of “une infinité de variantes possibles.” Blanchot claims that the “nouvelle version” adds nothing but “ôte beaucoup,” and can be considered as an entirely new work but also “toute pareille.” I will be citing the “nouvelle version” of 1950.
"Night Moves: Spatial Perception and the Place of Blanchot’s Early Fiction,” does not include *Thomas l’Obscur* among those of Blanchot’s novels which “point to a common atmosphere of enclosure with premonitions of impending violence akin to those found in Kafka’s depiction of the city in *The Trial* and Foucault’s references to panoptic societies in *Surveiller et punir.*”¹⁸ At first glance, it is understandable why this text is omitted. *Thomas l’Obscur* is an atmospheric work that focuses less on bureaucratic and exegetical authority and more on the experiences and oneric phenomena of a single character.

At the beginning of the novel, Thomas is at a beach, swimming. He undergoes a traumatic experience (possibly even his own death, as Hartman supposes), which forces him outside of himself, and he spends the night in a cave. Later, he returns to a hotel where he is either living or vacationing and the reader is introduced to Anne, a woman who could be a stranger, lover, or friend. Through the course of Anne’s illness and subsequent death, Thomas is exposed to new thoughts and experiences which force him to question his existence and life. It is in the penultimate chapter that questions of selfhood and subjectivity arise and will prove to be important to our discussion.

Though the content of *Thomas l’Obscur* does not rely on tropes consistent with Kafka’s oeuvre—such as errancy, the Law, narrow and labyrinthine spaces, etc.—the closing sentence is striking in its similarity to Kafka’s closing sentence in *The Trial*. In Kafka’s text, first published in France in 1933, Joseph K., facing the sentence that has been mysteriously imposed upon him, is executed by a knife “thrust ... deep into his heart and turned … twice. With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them [executioners]

immediately before him, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act. ‘Like a dog!’ he said: it was as if the shame of it must outlive him.”

Thomas, in Blanchot’s novel, is suspended in a strange dream-like state. Outside of himself, he regards everything around him as would a stranger. Thomas sees a sort of apparition (which could in fact be himself) slip into the waters of an ocean. “Thomas, aussi, regarda ce flot d’images grossières, puis quand ce fut son tour, il s’y précipita, mais tristement, désespérément, comme si la honte eût commencé pour lui.” The parallels between these two conclusions are quite prominent. Both characters see before their eyes images which are both clear and beyond immediate understanding. In Kafka’s text, the utterance “like a dog!” expresses all the despair and sadness which is stated explicitly in adverbial form by Blanchot. Lastly, the introduction of shame cannot be ignored.

Whereas for K., death is imminent and is confirmed not only by the knife wound but by the verb “outlive.” K. has no hope of survival, only the memory of his shame will last. Thomas’s case is much more ambiguous. The reader is not sure if Thomas is dying, committing suicide, or has some other fate awaiting him. Unlike K.’s shame which will outlive him (as if the shame were always there and will continue to be there), for Thomas, the shame is just now beginning, but surely it will last.

Thomas’ shame, however, made an earlier appearance when he “révél[a], en [lui], l’étrangeté de [sa] condition et la honte d’une existence interminable.”

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20 Blanchot, *Thomas L’Obscur*, 137. This concluding sentences is only marginally different than that of the 1941 version: “Thomas regarda à son tour ce flot d’images grossières, puis il s’y précipita tristement, désespérément, comme si la honte eût commencé pour lui.”
21 We can also note the the similarity of sentence structure, the use of the “comme si” in both instances, a structural device we studied in Chapter Two.
possesses an unimaginable place between life and death, or perhaps outside of life and death, and as a result, like Joseph K., he must feel a boundless and infinite shame at his quasi-immortality. But yet, he is not immortal. Thomas sees himself from the outside and muses: “Ce Thomas me force à paraître, tout en étant vivant, non pas même le mort éternel que j’étais et sur lequel personne ne pouvait poser les regards, mais un mort ordinaire, corps sans vie, sensibilité insensible, pensée sans pensée.” Where then is Thomas? Is he alive or dead? What corpse is he looking upon if not his own and how could a dead man perceive and relate the experience of his own death? Whatever this condition is, Thomas struggles against it:

Je fis un suprême effort pour me tenir en deçà de moi-même, le plus près possible du lieu des germes. Or, loin d’arriver, homme fait, adolescent, protoplasme, à l’état de possible, je m’acheminai vers quelque chose d’accompli, et j’entrevis, dans ces bas-fonds, la figure étrange de celui que j’étais réellement et qui n’avait rien de commun avec un homme déjà mort ou un homme encore à naître : compagnon admirable avec lequel je souhaitais de toutes mes forces de me confondre, mais séparé de moi, sans nul chemin pour me conduire à lui.

The language that Thomas uses to express himself underlines the fluctuations in what should be some form of uniformity of self. He is separated from himself, and this separation is reinforced when he refers to himself as both him and me. Thomas has essentially been decentered, deconstructed, and exists outside of corporality, outside of time, and outside of subjectivity in some “elsewhere,” which is neither death nor birth. The expressions that are being employed, the words that are being read, can hardly be said to belong to Thomas. Instead they belong to the space that “ce Thomas” occupies,

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23 Ibid., 105.
24 Ibid., 112. (Note the use of the words adolescent and s’acheminer. These two concepts will be important to our discussion of Claude Morali’s text.)
and in what acts as a powerful illustration of both Lacan’s and Foucault’s figuration of language, Thomas describes himself as an “Espèce de ventiloque intégral, partout où je criais, c’est là où je n’étais pas et où même j’étais en toutes parties égal au silence.”

These thoughts, this strange ambiguity in which Thomas exists as a non-existing being, this space in which he appears as nothing more than the presence of something that is absent comes to a sort of achèvement as Thomas experiences a form of madness, a madness which is quickly negated as not madness: “C’est alors qu’au sein d’une grotte profonde la folie du penseur taciturne m’apparut, et des mots inintelligibles résonnèrent à mes oreilles, tandis que j’écrivais sur le mur ces douces paroles : « Je pense, donc je ne suis pas. »” What could be read as nothing more than a parody of Descartes’ famous expression is more than mere mockery. What first appears as folly actually soothes Thomas; these are words that are “doux” (soft, sweet, mild, gentle) and they “me procurèrent une vision délicieuse.” This parody, mockery, and madness in fact allows for the apparition of something delicious, even beautiful.

Thinking outside of thought, existing outside of existence, Thomas is circumventing the Cartesian model of selfhood, subjectivity, and interiority. He is challenging a tradition of knowledge which considers dangerous that which is mysterious, disorderly, or outside. Thomas’ strange meditations continue as he imagines how he has never been where he “was:”

Je pense, dit Thomas, et ce Thomas invisible, inexprimable, inexistant que je devins, fit que désormais je ne fus jamais là où j’étais, et il n’y eut même en cela rien de mystérieux. Mon existence devint tout entier celle

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25 Ibid., 110.
26 Ibid., 114.
27 Ibid.
d’un absent qui, à chaque acte que j’accomplissais, produisait le même 
acte en ne l’accomplissant pas.  

The formulations that we are witnessing exist at the extreme border of language, 
of thought, of existence. They seem to become utterable only as one approaches death; it 
is death which makes them possible. The expression and phenomena, like Thomas 
himself, exist at some time beyond birth and death, and yet they unite birth and death in a 
mysterious circle. Blanchot has always relied on circles in his fiction and criticism, and it 
appears, as we position the Blanchodian self at the margins of death and birth, life and its 
opposite, that we approach an aporia, something unthinkable and mutually contradictory. 
But Blanchot (and Robert and Robbe-Grillet) through Kafka offers, if not an escape from 
this aporia, then at least a metaphor for it. 

Thomas describes his non-existence as outside life and death, beyond birth and 
dying, and explains how in this condition, he is like the non-dead, “Ces misérables, qui 
devenaient des hommes, éprouvaient à se sentir hommes le même effroi qu’Isaac sur le 
bûcher à devenir bélier.”  

Outside subjectivity, never nearer nor further to death than the 
death they carry within them, they feel the same terror that Isaac felt. Isaac, the son of 
Abraham, was meant to be offered to God as the ultimate sacrifice. God asked Abraham, 
as proof of his belief, to sacrifice his only son. Thomas asks us to imagine the fear of 
Isaac who is destined to become a ram for the purposes of a terrifying sacrifice. 

Of course Isaac was not sacrificed and a ram was sent to replace him, but this 
story plays a special role in Blanchot criticism because he equates it to Kafka’s 
relationship to literature. If Abraham sacrifices Isaac, he is not only sacrificing his son, 

28 Ibid., 116. 
29 Ibid., 107.
but his God and religion. Isaac must become the bearer of a covenant between God and Abraham, and if he were to die, Abraham’s entire future would die with it. Kafka, Blanchot reminds us, always felt the need to choose between life and literature, and if he were to choose literature (as he did) he would be forced to sacrifice his only hope at a future: a family. Kafka never married, never produced children and thus committed a rhetorical sacrifice. No progeny survive Kafka, only his oeuvre. All the same, it is in the rhetorical richness of childhood that we will aim to construct a way out of the paradox of subjectivity we have thus far described.

*Qui est moi aujourd’hui?*

We find perhaps no better framework for discussing the ambiguity of childhood in regard to the self and subjectivity than Claude Morali’s *Qui est moi aujourd’hui?* (1984). Morali’s text is integral to our discussion because it not only surveys the history of the discourse of the self, but it situates it within a contemporary theoretical milieu. His text navigates discussions of phenomenology, ontology, psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, dialecticism, egology, embryology, and, at times, even neurology.

In his preface, Emmanuel Levinas describes Morali’s project as one that is critical and inquisitive in regard to the “Je transcendental,” or what Robert Solomon called in his own history of the self the “transcendental pretense.” These notions, of course, as we outlined earlier, are inherited from Descartes and his *Première Méditation*. Morali characterizes the Cartesian tradition as privileging the way in which “la première personne du sujet s’y produit dans l’acte d’écrire, présenté comme artifice, feinte pour

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Morali is in fact opposing Descartes to what we have previously established is Blanchot’s position. Descartes would have it that saying I proves the existence of I and this process would hold true in writing as much as in thought. Blanchot of course maintains that the writer loses the power to say I. An intermediary step in between Morali’s depiction of Descartes’ stance and that of Blanchot may be Rimbaud’s “je est un autre.” Rimbaud’s poet has the power to create an I who is other than the author. The author is not depicted as an autobiographic subject in everything that he writes. The I subjectivity of a given fictional or even non-fictional text is not an extension of the subjectivity responsible for its composition.

In his study, Morali approaches the self or the Je in a negative mode, circling around what the self is not so as to gain some foothold in approaching the self in a productive manner. “Le mot je ne se réfère jamais au pur sujet,” Morali writes in his negative mode, “mais cela ne signifie pas que, dans certain cas, le « je » ne fait pas référence à quelque chose. A une « personne », que je suis, peut se rapporter le mot je — et à ce titre supporter des prédicats.” In attempting to break with the Cartesian model, or perhaps, so as better to conform to a contemporary continental tradition, Morali criticizes the European philosophical tradition which seeks to Fonder la croyance qu’il y a un « dehors » à notre expérience – et que dans cette expérience je ne laisse rien en dehors de primordial. Il s’agit d’établir qu’en tant que sujet, j’aie part à un tout qui m’excède, sans doute ; mais que cette part soit unique, incontournable et, par-dessus tout, exemplaire. En parlant de moi, en mon nom, j’accède par un logos universel à tout être réel possible ; même si beaucoup m’échappe et me reste étranger, je ne

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31 Ibid., 195.
32 Ibid., 37-38, (author’s emphasis).
The outside to which Morali is referring is transcendental truth. A belief in the absolute solidity and stability of individual being, in absolute Truth, or unquestionable values.

In contradistinction to this belief of inside and outside, Morali (like Foucault) seeks to enrich the possibilities of subjectivity. Instead of rigid stratifications that would demarcate the subject and impose hierarchies (Subject over Object, Self over Other, Inside over Outside), Morali attempts to allow for the possibility that

Le sujet dont je parle quand je parle de moi est bel et bien déjà ma non-personne, à qui il arrive ceci ou cela aujourd’hui ou hier, et dont la position par rapport aux autres non-personnes (eux, ils, elles) est signalée par sa position à l’égard du discours, émis d’une part comme un événement d’autre part subjectivation véritable.34

In describing a non-person, an absence where the self is supposed to be, Morali is already allowing for instability, flux, and what Levinas would call infinity.

To illustrate his idea, Morali alludes to Blanchot’s *Thomas l’Obscur*. In relation to language, the characters of Blanchot’s novels and *récits* are like puppets through which masters speak. Morali uses the analogy of a ventriloquist:

Le ventriloque ou le bateleur de la philosophie, convoqué ici, se trouvera acculé à tenir un discours sans cesse démenti ou dément, à moins qu’il ne s’apprête au silence monocorde et au regard mi-clos du magnétiseur….C’est le domaine du spécieux….c’est-à-dire des labyrinthes et des jeux de miroir, du fait de méthode et des machinations.35

What could be deemed mad, insane, or silly, is in fact only the nature of language acting as a subject in its own right. We are the dummy whose mouth is moved by language. We

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33 Ibid., 268-69.
34 Ibid., 47, (my emphasis).
35 Ibid., 34, (my emphasis).
may be more or less expressive, but still only a conduit for language, giving only the illusion of autonomy, as if by magic.

Naissance

The title of Moralis’ study derives from a fragment in Blanchot’s *Le pas au-delà*, which Morali uses as an epigraph to his text. I will cite the longer Blanchot excerpt:

> Comme si avait retenti, d’une manière étouffée, cet appel, un appel cependant joyeux, le cri d’enfants jouant dans le jardin: « qui est moi aujourd’hui ? » « qui tient lieu de moi ? » Et la réponse joyeuse, infinie : lui, lui, lui.  


This passage reveals two notions important to our discussion of subjectivity. First, it reiterates Blanchot’s theme of the *je* transforming into the *il*; in this case *moi* becomes *lui*. In a game of “Who is me?” the infinite answer is “him.” Secondly, it situates the discussion of subjectivity in the realm of childhood. Blanchot returns to this fragment in an article he wrote for the collection *Who Comes after the Subject?* In “Who?” he refers to Morali’s citation of his work and emphatically concludes: “So Let us be, even in the anguish and heaviness of uncertainty, from time to time, these children.”


What does Blanchot mean by inviting us to be like these children? The manner in which Blanchot situates the Author in relation to writing—the shifting of the *je* to the *il*—will partly answer this question. But the question also invites reflection upon the nature of childhood and how children relate to the notion of selfhood and the pronoun *I*. Younger children do not understand how I can belong to everyone. I is a shifting part of speech, it belongs to everyone, and yet it is totally singular. There is something rhetorically hopeful in the idea that children do not possess the knowledge that they too
can use I, can be I. For the child (until the age of around 30 months), only others can be I. And so when asked who will be “moi” the answer can only be “lui!” Infinitely, at that.

Morali considers many of the theories proposed by Lacan and others, and yet he accounts for them by figuring them into a literary tradition, a tradition that one will recognize as exceptionally modern: “Que pourtant la littérature s’en mêle et recouvre de ses propres équivoques le témoignage vécu de sujets innocents, voilà qui complique l’affaire.”

It is true that literature complicates things. There are petits egos who speak of themselves, there is je who is another, and there are the mysterious subjectivities which populate the experimental modernist texts of Mallarmé, Beckett and Blanchot—examples used by Morali. Literature complicates the discourse because in life outside of literature all subjects have a biological birth. In literature, this step is omitted. Referring to some of the same passages that we have just cited in Thomas l’Obscur, Morali acknowledges the enigma that is “je suis,” and references the self in a continuum which acknowledges not only one’s parents but childhood in general:

Sans conteste je suis l’effet d’une union. Mes parents, ce sont moi et une sorte de mon double, une sorte de mon manque, empreinte qui m’anticipe, qui m’attend, qui fait ma place, à peine différente de ma mort et pourtant impossible à confondre avec elle, séparée d’elle par moi. Si donc je résulte de cette conjonction, c’est non comme un produit, comme un tiers de surcroît, mais comme une séparation, frontière de contact au frottement de deux formes inassimilables de mon absence.

Levinas’ preface calls the reader’s attention to the way in which Morali underlines naissance as an emblem for any large question of consciousness, subjectivity or selfhood: “la conscience … est aussi appelée à constituer le sens de sa propre contituation

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38 Morali, 88.  
39 Ibid., 25.  
40 Ibid.
[sic], elle échappe à elle-même par le trou que creuse dans cette constitution la naissance de la conscience!" Levinas summarizes Morali by way of glossing Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of Husserl (an awkward chain of command):

Cette conscience est toujours aussi la vue du Je, ma vue « Je est un droit du regard », selon l’expression de Claude Morali qui admire beaucoup cette note de Merleau-Ponty commentant Husserl : « La vie pré-personnelle, généralité primordiale où nous serions confondus moi et les autres est encore une vue mienne du monde."

In Levinas’ appraisal, we see a privileging of a visual lexicon, but also an instance on the pre-personal—that which precedes birth, the before-the-subject.

For Morali, the concept of naissance takes on more of a symbolic role than one of literal substance. It is not the “mise-au-monde/ accouchement” that Morali is interested in as much as a coming-into-existence which serves as the heart of his study. In fact, Morali positions naissance next to myths that circulate around one’s being and when it begins. Ruyer is quoted as describing the prenatal self as a biological possibility: “Avant ma naissance, « Je » n’ai existé que sous forme de cellules germinales contenant, croit-on, mon organisme adulte.” The time before one’s birth, what Morali calls “hesitation” recalls Kafka’s description of his own existence: “My life is a hesitation before birth.” Morali, however, complicates this statement, one is neither born too early nor too late: “Non que je sois né trop tôt ; ou, peut-être, parce que naître serait toujours trop tôt.” If one is in fact born too early it is only owing to the human animal’s extremely slow

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41 Ibid., 8, (author’s emphasis).
42 Ibid., (author’s emphasis).
43 Ibid., 246.
44 Ibid., 247.
45 Kafka, Franz, Diaries: 1914-1923, 211.
46 Morli, 256. Blanchot wrote something similar in L’écriture du désastre.
maturation process. Unique in its capacity for self-knowledge, unique, presumably, in its capacity for language, unique for self-reflection, one is still born too early. Knowledge, language, and reflection only come after a long period of gestation and formation. Morali is aware of this fact even if he never goes into details and instead places the temporality of naissance into context. Morali returns to Levinas, citing: “‘je suis rivé à mon être’, pour essayer plutôt de me saisir à la naissance comme « dérivée » d’être.” Instead of a biological discussion, Morali highlights the priority of naissance as a moment when, in all purity, one is, when one can no longer be separated from one’s existence.

Yes, one is inseparable from one’s being, but one’s existence is tempered by forces that precede one’s naissance, one’s coming-into-being. Perhaps the most fundamental of these forces, in the context of Morali’s text, is language. Sounding several times as a minor chord throughout the text, Morali returns to questions of language and voice. It is language, like “la voix — si l’on veut parler comme Maurice Blanchot — qui chuchote … « elle » parle ; car elle nous prend en elle d’emblée, elle nous parle — au sens direct et au sens indirect.” This illustration of language seizing us reflects Lacan’s definitions of language. Quoting Lacan, Morali explains how

à ce stade infans nous paraîtra dès lors manifester en une situation exemplaire la matrice symbolique où le je se précipite en une forme primordiale avant qu’il ne s’objective dans la dialectique de l’identification à l’autre et que le langage ne lui restitue dans l’universel sa fonction de sujet.

These discussions of voice, dialoguing as they do with Blanchot’s criticism, also recall and help illustrate Lacan’s thinking about language. It is in childhood that the subject is

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47 Ibid., 269-270.
48 Ibid., 45, (author’s emphasis).
49 Ibid., 207.
created, in the mirror stage. A child (*infans*, speechless) at the age of six months can not only recognize his mirror reflection but uses it to understand his world. In later life, absent a mirror, subjects will rely on the mirror-like faculty of the words spoken to them. Morali quotes Lacan: “le sujet apparaît d’abord dans l’Autre, en tant que le premier signifiant, le signifiant unaire surgi au champ de l’Autre, et il représente le sujet pour un autre signifiant, lequel autre signifiant a pour effet l’aphanisis du sujet.”\(^{50}\) This moment is described by Lacan as a movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. Throughout these phases, there are experiences that remain outside the framework of language—original and traumatic experiences that language cannot subsume or represent: the Real. It seems that the subject resides in the Real, composed and reflected back via language, it can never be composed or contained by language, or for that matter, completely understood and accounted for. It is the fact that language accounts for such huge parts of our being that led Lacan to conclude that our unconscious is structured like language.

Relying on Lacan, Morali describes the infinite chain of signifiers that compose language, quoting, “Le signifiant est ce qui transmet (représente) le sujet pour un autre signifiant.”\(^{51}\) In reference to the mirror stage and the immersion into language:

> Ce sur quoi pèse Lacan en ce point, c’est que cette image primordiale qui, d’objet, va être recentrée en un Je, est d’ores et déjà donnée en dehors de toute constitution, de toute genèse, qu’elle soit motrice ou linguistique … l’inanité va tenir lieu de preuve d’existence ; tout va s’y renverser et s’y offrir à contresens. Au moins, est-ce ainsi que naît véritablement JE.\(^ {52}\)

*Naissance* is a start and is the moment when one’s subjectivity is first subjected by the forces that precede and will survive it, but from this idea of *naissance*, Morali elaborates

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 211.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 208.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 205.
the ontological and cultural significance of the movement from *naissance* to other forms of existence, an absolutely integral process which we may simply call childhood. Morali distinguishes this movement or state as a creating or an inventing in relation to one’s subjectivity: “Le caractère propre d’un organisme, de son état naissant au terme de sa croissance, apparaît bien essentiellement de créer, d’inventer et de maintenir son d’individualité-pour-soi.”

Calling back to the subject’s condition vis-à-vis language as a sort of ventriloquist’s dummy, Morali calls it a domain that is “spécieux … c’est-à-dire des labyrinthes et des jeux de miroir, du fait de méthode et des machinations.” The figure of labyrinths, mirror reflections, and machinations recalls the very fiction we have been examining. *The Castle, Aminadab, Dans le labyrinthe*, these are novels composed of characters lost in mazes, stuck in vestibular spaces, set adrift in impenetrable bureaucratic machinations. The trope of the labyrinth, the endless, seemingly hopeless quest, is linked rhetorically to a sort of childhood or bildungsroman-like condition. Morali posits the movement from *naissance* to childhood with the ambiguous term “genesis,” which is both a starting point and an intermediary stage of manipulation, evolution, and flux:

Penser la naissance comme tension entre surgissement naïf et structure transcendante, c’est précisément définir les conditions d’exercice de ce « savoir en plus » : familier et constamment accessible, cependant mal identifiable, inacceptable comme tel, voire inutilisable en tout état de cause … La manipulation de la notion de genèse.

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53 Ibid., 219.
54 Ibid., 34, (my emphasis).
55 We will be reminded that Marthe Robert read *The Castle* as a bildungsroman in *L’Ancien et le nouveau*.
56 Morali, 258.
It is important to Morali once again to recall the Cartesian notion of a transcendental self as an endpoint in this hope of maturation and absolute truth, but we recognize that Morali is also criticizing such a traditional valuing of the self. What instead is being valued is the movement, the long middle phase of childhood, full of flux, ambiguity, instability, and disassociation with the self.

**Childhood**

If the self becomes rhetorically like childhood, that is because childhood itself is a sort of middle passage. Between birth and death, the self is continually growing, changing, learning, and experiencing setbacks. The self is “Entre les deux, naissance, passage, diaphragme. Entre naissance et mort, entre possible et réel, entre corps et âme, entre Plotin et Blanchot, Je suis transition réelle, insaisissable, de deux irréalités.” What makes the self real is the unreality of both death and birth, or, to use the terminology of Blanchot, what makes the self possible is the impossibility of death.

Insofar as we have studied novels full of wandering (both a physical wandering within geographical space as well as subjective wandering within the hazy borders of fictional selfhood), Morali describes that the child-like status of the self is “l’histoire effective des péripéties d’où l’existant que je suis constitue l’aboutissement, en quel sens peut-on le définir,” or using slightly different vocabulary, he calls it a path: “le chemin parcouru est prévu conduire à la répétition de l’identique, semence la plus simple d’ordre … les erreurs redressées en cour s de route, sont aussi édifiantes à envisager.” Morali’s lexicon not only accesses the path thematic, which was important to Blanchot’s reading

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57 Ibid., 28.
58 Ibid., 219, (my emphasis).
59 Ibid., 223.
of Kafka, but also the appearance of “erreurs” which we explored in Chapter Four. The
erreurs, according to Morali, are a variation of changes and metamorphoses because
“Pour MOI, il n’y a qu’une force de métamorphose.”60 Along with the unavoidable theme
of errancy, metamorphosis, and flux, Morali adds the idea of somnambulism. In a literary
context, Morali claims that a certain communication can be found in “le somnambulisme
et la magie.”61 Somnambulism is a theme to which all of the texts we have examined
refer, as is the relevance of magic (or the fantastic). For Morali, the self’s sleep-walking
condition can be found in the slippery, decentered nature of subjectivity: neither here nor
there, not fully conscious but not wholly deprived of autonomy—it is all of these things
at once. We have seen how such notions have been read in Kafka criticism and included
in texts clearly born of a Kafkaesque tradition. These themes come to a head in Morali’s
study as he asks and half-answers his probing inquiry into what the self is and how, or if,
it can be delineated:

Qu’est-ce donc que le Moi, à ce niveau de spéculation ? Il peut se penser
comme une stase, un arrêt dans le processus de la vie, caractérisé par une
place dans un enchainement et un dynamisme de réitération qui se dissocie
de lui, lui-même étant le produit d’une telle dissociation et ainsi à l’infini.
La contradiction du moi est donc double ; voulant vivre pour soi, il veut sa
mort, et engendre une dérivation perturbatrice qui tend à le nier en
revenant à son point de départ, ou à en récréer les conditions.62

The movement of childhood, a space on a long chain, dynamic and part of infinite
changes expresses itself as a paradox. The self negates itself the more it tries to exert its
autonomy and individuality. It seeks to be independent and yet is faced with its place in a

60 Ibid., 254-55.
61 Ibid., 93.
62 Ibid., 200.
community. And, like Kafka, it wants, simultaneously and with equal verve, to be alone and to be part of, for a lack of a better word, a family.

**Kafka’s Children**

Kafka never had children, never married, even though he entertained the idea of both possibilities, the failure to do this caused him great suffering. Even if Kafka never married or had children, his novels, stories, and tales are well-populated with many children. “Children on a Country Road” (1913) offers itself as an example, but so too do prominent figures in his novels. In *The Trial*, a group of loud, laughing, mocking girls pester Joseph K. as he visits the painter Titorelli. While inside the painter’s studio, the girls remain on the stairs just outside, peeking through the door, giggling, and shouting in derision at Joseph K. Another child is Hans, a school boy who offers to help K. in *The Castle*. This boy, unlike the girls, is extremely serious and not easily won over; only the promise of a walking stick makes an ally out of him. To all outward appearances, this boy, Hans, is like the boy who leads the Soldier through the streets of *Dans le labyrinthe*: he is not enthusiastic about his chore, but accomplishes it out of a sense of duty.

I wish to focus on the child-like characters of the *The Castle* in particular: the Assistants Arthur and Jeremiah. These two characters, like the girls outside Titorelli’s flat, plague K. to no end. They infuriate K., but are almost worthy of pity as they are so much like children. We may note how the assistants are not aberrations but simply representative of the mores of the village. K’s reaction to them, his behavior in general, is torn between contempt and a deeper need for understanding. At first glance, the assistants seem to be the worst examples of the Castle village’s rudeness and cruelty, but they are
really closer to the norm. When he first arrives, K. comments on the townsfolk who are, like the assistants, not only worthy of scorn, but to be pitied, like children. While at the inn, trying to find a place to sleep, K.

> Turned round to scowl at them, and found that they, too, were all looking at him. When he saw them sitting like that, however, each man in his own place, not speaking to one another and without any apparent mutual understanding, united only by the fact that they were all gazing at him, he concluded that it was not out of malice that they pursued him, perhaps they really wanted something from him and were only incapable of expressing it, of not that, it might be pure childishness, which seemed to be in fashion at the inn; was not the landlord himself childish?

Not entirely dissimilar to the villagers in the taproom, the assistants are incompetent, meddlesome, mischievous rascals. Sent by the Castle administration, K. believes, to help him in his surveying, they are, in fact, entirely ignorant of the trade. They appear to K. indistinguishable, and in a display of arrogance, K. refuses to acknowledge that they are individuals, instead choosing to refer to them both as ‘Arthur’ and making both of them responsible for all chores, even at the expense of efficiency.

Marthe Robert, in *L’Ancien et le nouveau*, examines the complexity of these overgrown children and their relationship to both K. and the Castle authorities. Robert analyzes what she sees as a “dédoubllement secondaire de l’auteur,” namely the duality of the two assistants and the land surveyor. Drawing a comparison to *Don Quixote*, Robert sees the assistants as being Sancho Panza-like figures. The split of the author, what she calls the “demonic” is in fact just a refiguration, in a way, of the Cartesian mind / body split. K., in his serious (even spiritual) quest for a meeting with Klamm or official recognition by the Castle, Robert writes, can be seen to represent the mind, whereas the

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jovial, playful (mischievous) corporeal assistants tend toward representations of the body. Robert explains, “On ne le voit mieux nulle part que dans le Château, où le diable scinde tout en deux, créant une foule de doubles entre lesquels K. tente en vain d’établir une hiérarchie, mais sans avoir lui-même d’identité ni de visage reconnaissable.” The occurrence of doubling forces K. into increasingly absurd and desperate situations. Desiring of Freida, he is never left alone with her long enough to prove his love. Desperate for employment, he must navigate the impenetrable official hokum. Needing help, he is given as aids only the incompetent assistants and the reviled Barnabas family.

These unfulfilled needs, unsatisfied desires, and worthless helpers create in K. a “demonic” character, a figure who comes to doubt his own needs, question his own knowledge, and distrust himself, even in subjects he once held to be totally certain. There is a perpetual conflict, or tension, which Robert documents:

Comme [K.] ne peut renoncer à se connaître lui-même, il ne lui reste qu’à poursuivre inlassablement avec ses doubles l’étrange dialogue donquichottesque où, comme le dit Kafka ailleurs pour définir sa pensée, l’argumentation va de pair avec un sortilège, sans que la raison triompe de l’enchantement ou que la magie vienne jamais à bout de la logique.

One of the outcomes—certainly not a solution—to this conflict is what Robert calls “l’infantilisme donquichottesque.” Her example is the maternal care that Sancho Panza gives to Don Quixote or “les semonces que s’attire continuellement l’Arpenteur, enfant questionneur.” Yes, K. displays the same child-like tendencies that we noticed in Thomas. He is stubborn, impatient, rude, and unwilling to listen. These detrimental traits

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65 Ibid., 24.
66 Ibid., 24-25 (author’s emphasis).
67 Ibid., 46.
68 Ibid. These endless rebukes are like those in Aminadab as well as the town’s disapproving treatment of the Soldier in Robbe-Grillet’s Dans le labyrinthe.
are commented upon, K. is even called childish by Freida, but as The Castle continues toward its absent ending, the reader sees K. grow more and more serious, more adult-like, losing all lightness, all humor. He is entrapped in a neurotic dualism which Robert explains thus: “Pour s’exprimer totalement, elle mêle constamment au ton des revendications enfantines le ton sévère ou narquois de la critique adulte, si bien qu’elle dit la fidélité et la révolte, le dévouement et l’hostilité, la crédulité et le scepticisme, sans chercher le moins du monde à accorder ses sentiment avec ses idées.”69

And yet, despite the inept assistants and all of their pranks and misdeeds (culminating in Jeremiah’s absconding with K.’s future bride, Freida), we, along with K., “[apprenons] naturellement trop – ce sont bien réellement des aides, ils ont été envoyés loyalement par le Château pour le distraire, pour l’aider gentiment à se guérir du sérieux mortel en quoi le Château voit son plus lourd péché.”70 The passage to which Robert is referring is in Jeremiah’s speech to K., after he leaves K.’s service (or is dismissed, according to K.). The assistants tell Galater, after he appoints them to work with K., that they know nothing of surveying. “Thereupon he replied: That’s not the point: if it’s necessary, he’ll teach you it. The main thing is to cheer him up a little. According to the reports I’ve received he takes everything too seriously.”71 It seems that the Castle was in fact paying attention to K.’s actions and benevolently sent two characters to help him. But the Castle’s “help” was not to aid him in his desperate attempts to reach an official or to break the bureaucratic silence but rather in a moral capacity, to teach him a valuable lesson: namely not to take himself so seriously.

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69 Ibid., 46-47.
70 Ibid., 230.
71 Kafka, The Castle, 234 (my emphasis).
If the assistants’ responsibility is to help K. lighten up, then they excel in their role as buffoons, and yet fail miserably to relax the uptight Land-Surveyer. K. is neither amused nor ready to learn from them. K. observes the duality of the assistants and, while talking with Freida, simultaneously reproaches her and describes the assistants as being 

In appearance good, childish, merry, irresponsible youths, fallen from the sky, from the Castle, a dash of childhood’s memories with them too; all that of course must have seemed very nice, especially when I was the antithesis of it all, and was always running after affairs moreover which were scarcely comprehensible, which were exasperating to you, and which threw me together with people whom you considered deserving of your hate.”

The last word is not K.’s, nor is the final deed. Jeremiah absconds with Freida and the reader (if not K.) grows concurrently more and less suspicious of these child-like assistants, who are chosen expressly for their immaturity. They are, in the end, not demons who torture K., as he believes, but pranksters. K. treats them cruelly and demands, “‘What have you to complain about, then?’” They respond immediately, ‘That you can’t understand a joke. What have we done? Jested a little, laughed a little, teased your fiancée a little. And all according to our instructions, too.” The Assistants are irreproachable after all because they have the blessing of the Castle, whereas K. is still a foreigner, a guest allowed to stay in the village only by the graces of the administration.

It is in the confrontation between K. and Jeremiah that the reader sees exhibited most clearly the dualism that Robert describes so well and which is present throughout The Castle. Lost between the earth and the heaven, trapped between reason and superstition, cast between childhood and adulthood, the characters of The Castle are in perpetual erreur. Robert explores the possible meanings of this duality: 

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Ibid., 252-53.
Qui a raison dans ce chœur où les deux voix sont également fortes et claires, l’âme enfantine qui revendique son droit au rêve, ou l’esprit adulte, qui tire son seul espoir du désolant constant de ce qui est ? Le donquichottisme ne le sait pas, il ignore même d’où pourrait lui venir à ce sujet une réponse décisive, et c’est exactement cette ignorance qui fait l’urgence de sa mission.73

The quixoticism that Robert pursues is compatible with Morali’s description of the flux and transformation of enfance, and what Blanchot called l’erreur or the exile in the desert. Refusing a decisive answer, we recognize as not only a resounding theme in the criticism of both Robert and Blanchot, but also as a similarity to Morali’s celebration of subjectlessness—as errancy among identities, meanings, selves and subjects. Lacking fixity, one can roam. Outside of subjectivity, one can only explore possibilities.

73 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 47.
CONCLUSION

Grandiose Statements

In their seminal *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren caution against following in the footsteps of the “school of French *comparatistes*,” who concentrate on “such questions as the reputation and penetration, the influence and fame, of Goethe in France and England, of Ossian and Carlyle and Schiller in France.”¹ They are attempting to delineate the boundaries of what comparative literature is, and they warn that “No distinct system can … emerge from the accumulation of such studies. There is no methodological distinction,” they claim, “between a study of ‘Shakespeare in France’ and a study of ‘Shakespeare in eighteenth-century England.’”² A study in the model they wish to avoid does not “permit us to analyse and judge an individual work of art, or even to consider the complicated whole of its genesis; instead, they are mainly devoted either to such echoes of a masterpiece as translation, … imitations, [and] the migrations and the spread of its themes and forms.”³

In this study, I have concentrated on literary notions and avoided the question of influence and imitations by “second-rate authors.”⁴ I have endeavored to use Kafka as a lens through which to view the writings of Robert, Blanchot, and Robbe-Grillet, three

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² Ibid., 48.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
authors whose interrogations of literature and criticism are indispensable to French letters of the twentieth century. I would venture to disagree to some extent with Wellek and Warren’s position. I believe that a wealth of understanding does come from the study of the transmission of important authors into different national literatures. In fact, I would like to develop the introduction into a longer study, and provide a purview of Kafka in France, expanding upon the models of Goth, Robert, and Roboin. At the same time, I am interested in studies similar in scope on, for instance, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Philip Roth, or Witold Gombrowic in France or Camus, Levinas, and Flaubert in any number of national literatures. More than a chronology of translations or a list of influences, studies of this nature can draw out literary trends and examine problems that present themselves in both the critical and fictional domains. With Kafka, interrogations of genre, the author, interpretation, and the self come to the fore. With a different author the themes and possibilities may be wholly different.

In “Translation: Literature and Letters,” Octavio Paz describes how studying literature across borders (and not just as translation) is an important hermeneutical tool. He confronts the question of the cross-language movement of literature by analyzing the practice of translation, commentary, and the ways in which literary trends are bound by neither chronology nor national language: “The greatest creative periods of Western poetry,” he asserts, “have been preceded or accompanied by intercrossing between different poetic traditions.”\(^5\) He discusses the troubling issue of disentangling influence

and progress by stating that “No trend, no style has ever been national.” Paz concludes that “styles are coalescent and pass from one language to another; the works, each rooted in its own verbal soil, are unique … unique but not isolated: each is born and lives in relation to other works composed in different languages. Thus the plurality of language” helps to produce “a world of interrelationships made up of contradictions and harmonies, unions and digressions.” It is into this spirit of cross-contamination that I have attempted to tap. Paz’s stance is not incompatible with Wellek and Warren’s; they are not in direct opposition. Yet Paz’s description encourages work similar to “Kafka in France,” whereas Wellek and Warren’s view tends only to warn of the potential pitfalls.

Though Kafka has been my fil conductuer, I would like to think that these chapters have not been about Kafka. I have focused instead on literary questions of long-standing debate and speculation, chief among them the confrontation of literary genres and conventions, the alienation of the writer from his or her self, and the possibility and utility of commentary. In the previous chapter, I questioned if we could read the presence of childhood in The Castle, in the light of Morali’s Qui est moi aujourd’hui?, as a metaphor for the wider question of interpretation, reading, and writing that we have explored in Robert, Robbe-Grillet, and Blanchot.

Childhood as an abstract concept can be viewed as circular. It is both the future and the past, and it pursues itself in an infinite circle. We were all once children and yet it is the children of the next generation who will survive us, themselves age, and be replaced by yet another generation. The next generation of children is not the future

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid. (my emphasis).
simply because they are carrying the genetic materials of the human species; they will also be the future students and teachers, the future readers and writers. And yet, formidable complexities frustrate these future readers and writers—stable meanings are in fact errant, transcendental truths are in fact relative, and grandiose statements of possibility seem to highlight the limitations that threaten literature.

With the threat of interruption, incompleteness, and inconclusiveness confronting almost every word of this project, I would like to return to a question that challenged me, first posed by Robert, and which is present in the work of Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet, and has been addressed in every chapter: “Est-ce à dire que la grandeur de la littérature ne peut plus consister que dans un grandiose constat de sa faillite?” I should answer with a resounding, “no!” But this no becomes less resounding; it grows ever meeker. It becomes nothing more than a piping, like “Josephine the Singer”—a murmuring, a doubtful, hesitant mark. But still it remains. This hesitant no, paradoxically, signals a note of affirmation, of hope. It is in response to this question that I wonder if childhood can in fact be shaped into a metaphor. Robert’s question, whether it is answered affirmatively or negatively, is not an end but a beginning. It is not the culmination of a line of reasoning, but rather a new starting point. We encounter in the literature and criticism that is founded on Kafka’s writing a mixture of childhood and adulthood, a fluidity of subjectivity within every individual. We see this flux in the Soldier’s interaction with his child guide and the townspeople in Dans le labyrinthe, and we see it in Thomas’ childlike naïveté and overly serious pursuit of a prize that does not exist. We recognize in these novels a resistance to interpretation that comes from, in part, their mixture of naïveté and

8 Robert, L’Ancien et le nouveau, 310.
experience, adulthood and childhood. Like the evolution of the human subject from birth, to childhood, adulthood, and death (only to be replaced in the next generation by the same), we recognize a limit to our ability to understand.

From Robert’s initial question, a series of analogous inquiries can be asked, queries which we have also seen in Blanchot and Robbe-Grillet’s texts: Why this impulse to interpret when we know that the riddle will remain unresolved? Why write, asks the paradox, when everything has been said? Why interpret, asks the fatigued critic, when meanings remain inconclusive? And yet, these truisms feel unsatisfying. They are the same truisms we face when confronting the inconclusiveness of meaning in literature, the aporia that Robert addresses in L’Ancien et le nouveau, and that we encountered in Bruyère, Nancy, and Des Forêts.

But we do continue to read, despite all obstacles, and authors continue to produce works, despite the daunting nature of the task. It only seems fitting that Kafka would confide to Oskar Pollack his opinion about the true purpose of books:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we’re reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us.\(^9\)

The reader understands immediately the urgency that Kafka’s thought demands of his own writing and books in general. They must break the “frozen sea inside us.” But how can we expect to read a book more than once and for it to have the same effect? The axe

will surely grow blunt or the frozen ice within us will surely, at some point, begin to melt. In this way, is reading not like childhood? We were once children and we had once never read our favorite books. But once we have read, we cannot then experience the innocent entry into those books again. And so we look for the next book to break that infernal, internal ice.

Yes, we were once children. And there will be children in the future. These banal statements refer back to the questions we have drawn from the texts we have examined: Does this mean that we are to regret our lost childhood, to experience a ceaseless nostalgia? Has everything been said? Has every story been told? Is literature’s goal only “a grandiose statement of its failure?” No! Literature’s purpose is to inspire us to keep writing, to keep reading, and to keep interpreting. We read fresh, in innocence, like children. But we return to books that we have already read, perhaps seeking to relive that original innocence. We may attempt to write a book and fail, but we will return to write again. Things have been said, and they remain to be resaid. And resaid. We want to relive the innocence of writing what we have never written. We strive to relive the innocence of reading what we have never read. We must constantly seek the axe that will shatter the sea of ice within us.

Morali concludes his study by emphatically stating: “Et enfin, mathématiquement, avant de recommencer, afin de ne jamais plus recommencer, nous naîtrons.”

10 We seek not to begin again, not even to continue on, but to be in perpetual beginning, a sort of naissance. Let us not begin again, let us begin for the first time. Let us write, let us read, and let us interpret for the first time. We may invariably finish our projects, but only in —

10 Morali, 292.
spite of ourselves, as if what we are seeking is an infinite task, a task so imperfect as to be complete, so incomplete as to be perfect.
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