

FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT  
IN MODERNITY

KAFKA'S CAGES

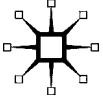
EDITED BY

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First published in 2011 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

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175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-11342-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Freedom and confinement in modernity : Kafka's cages / edited by  
A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis.

p. cm.—(Studies in European culture and history)

ISBN 978-0-230-11342-8

1. Kafka, Franz, 1883-1924—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Liberty in  
literature. 3. Self (Philosophy) in literature. 4. Imprisonment in literature.  
I. Kordela, Aglaia Kiarina, 1963- II. Vardoulakis, Dimitris.

PT2621.A26Z719926 2011

833'.912—dc22

2010042508

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: May 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

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## KAFKA'S CAGES: AN INTRODUCTION

*A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis*

Kafka's literary universe is organized around constellations of imprisonment. All his novels present states of confinement. In *Amerika*, Karl Rossmann arrives in New York like a prisoner and then he is soon trapped in different circumstances. In *The Castle*, the elusive castle on the top of the mountain and its officials exercise such an attraction to the land-surveyor that he is unable to leave the village. And in *The Trial*, Josef K. is found guilty without being told what crime he is accused of. This sense of imprisonment is also crucial in the novella *The Metamorphosis*, in which Gregor Samsa is confined to his room. It is also prevalent in the short stories; for instance, in Georg Bendemann's senseless condemnation to death by his father in "The Judgement," in the chilling description of the torture machine "In the Penal Colony," and in the cages of "A Report to an Academy" and "A Hunger Artist," to mention just a few.

Traditionally, Kafka's hermetically confined world has been conceptualized as a reflection of Kafka's own life. Kafka was trapped by his family circumstances and his domineering father in particular. He was "in prison" while working at the office, unable to devote himself to writing, and felt engaged even in his engagements with women. Broadening this perspective, the predominance of arbitrary confinement in Kafka's writings is conceptualized as a wider metaphysical or religious quest to show the fallen world of modernity, in which man is trapped in his complete separation from spirituality. This interpretation can be further nuanced by introducing the idea of existential anguish: Kafka's depictions of imprisonment are a reflection of the nothingness of human life. All of the above interpretations share as their common premise the supposition of a distinct, and ultimately oppositional, alternative to imprisonment. A sense of redemption, salvation, or freedom is the ideal or aim that the tortured Kafka heroes strive for but cannot attain.

The present collection proposes a different way of grasping the figure of the cage in Kafka's writings. According to this approach, imprisonment



signifies neither a tortured state nor the striving toward something unattainable. Rather, it is the very critique of a culture that first posits a clear-cut opposition between confinement and freedom, and then sets up freedom as an ideal, which, conceived in such absolute terms, is by definition unattainable. In its laborious and exhilarating pages, Kafka's work probes the arsenal of the configurations through which such a culture reduces freedom to the bait whose promise and impossibility torment people.

\* \* \*

To understand Kafka's critical intervention requires situating him within a certain literary and philosophical tradition. On the one hand, foundational texts of the literary canon are narratives structured around a confining frame. Homer's *Iliad* recounts how the Greek army is stranded outside Troy for ten long years. The stories of *The Arabian Nights* are framed by the narrative of Scheherazade telling Shahryar a tale every night, hoping that in this way he will not kill her like his other wives. More modern classics, as well, are narratives of confinement, such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the collection of stories narrated while a group of people are confined in a villa in order to avoid the plague. On the other hand, it is often overlooked that the issue of freedom does not arise as a question for philosophy and political theory until the seventeenth or eighteenth century, with the emergence of the bourgeois individual. The Greek classics of political philosophy or ethics, for instance, do not emphasize freedom at all. Plato's *Republic* is an inquiry into justice and the best possible government, while the linchpin of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the issue of friendship. Even if one considers the medieval legal notion of *legibus solutus* or its subsequent reformation as the sovereign's prerogative—that is, the standing of the king or the sovereign above the law—then it is clear that this exceptional right is not grounded on a presumed freedom on the part of the king or the sovereign.

The reason for this lack of reference to freedom prior to the seventeenth or eighteenth century is that striving toward freedom is an idea that presupposes the formation of the individual as an autonomous agency, in order for it to make sense in the first place. It is the construction of individuality that allows for a discourse on freedom to develop both in literature—as in the eighteenth-century novel—and in political philosophy. From this perspective, Kafka's topoi of imprisonment—his *cages*—take on a radically new meaning. Rather than being images of the failure of the individual to attain the ideal of freedom on the metaphysical or social level, they are instead images of the failure of freedom to define the individual. In short, Kafka's cages can be understood as a reaction to the promise of freedom—the means by which the individual is both defined and ensnared.

This way of understanding imprisonment in Kafka is radically different because Kafka's cages are no longer seen as a fault or source of anguish. Instead, the cages in Kafka's works become the means for Kafka to engage in the political and philosophical debates of his—and our—time. The vitality of the condition of engagement has ensured that Kafka's works continue to have a cultural resonance long after his death, in a century that saw the emergence of concentration camps, and in a new century that started with the establishment of new camps to incarcerate without charge “enemy combatants,” “illegal aliens,” and suspects of “terrorism.”

\* \* \*

The chapters collected in this volume respond to this way of understanding Kafka's cages, and each addresses them on several literary, philosophic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical levels, as well as through rich and thoughtfully conceived interdisciplinary methodologies. The chapters have been clustered according to the emphasis they place on certain aspects—interpretative, theoretical, or performative—of the cages in Kafka's work and the ways in which they reflect modernity.

The following summaries are only meant to indicate the salient features of the various cages of modernity addressed by each author.

Stanley Corngold's chapter “Special Views on Kafka's Cages” shows how Kafka constructs, through an incessant metamorphosis of the cage—ranging from culture to the skull—a “writerly ontology,” in which the cage embodies the paradoxical coincidence of a confining cell full of negative openings and a protective fortress full of negative walls. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and others, as well as Claude Lefort's, rather than Max Weber's, reading of Marx, Corngold advances the thesis that in Kafka even the bureaucratic office becomes a trope-like space enabling erotic play among its parts, for, as a cage, it is itself animate and charismatically charged.

Engaging with Eric Marson, René Girard, Benjamin, and Stuart Lasine, Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll argue in “Delusions of Agency: Kafka, Imprisonment, and Modern Victimhood” that Kafka's *The Trial* portrays the engagement of specifically *modern* victimhood. It does so, first, because of its double absence of agency: the victim lacks moral agency, just as the bureaucratic law functions like a mob in that no person can be singled out as responsible for K's death. Second, the legitimacy of modern victimization lies, as Max Weber pointed out, not in a “reasonable” basis, but in “scapegoating.” This is an anthropological, rather than morally based, procedure that aims at generating social unanimity against the designated scapegoat, whereby the scapegoat bears no moral agency. It is for these two

reasons that Josef K.'s primary error lies in his delusion that he is an *agent at all*.

In his dialogue with Derrida's readings of Kafka's *Before the Law*, in "Kafka and Derrida *Before the Laws*," Howard Caygill expands exponentially the text's framing layers, whereby the play of *mise en abyme* that Derrida finds exemplary in this uncontainable story is shown to be itself *mise en abyme*, due to its (re)publications prior to both *A Country Doctor* and *The Trial*. In Caygill's deferred analytical itinerary, Kafka's story intertwines literary, political, cultural, and historical contexts, thereby transforming itself from a narrative about the tension between the universality of the law and the singularity of any entrance to it, as it is canonically read, to a story about failed emigration/immigration, which becomes even more plural as, depending on its position between other of Kafka's stories, it is narrated from either perspective—the immigrant's or the guard's.

In John Mowitt's "Kafka's Cage," Kafka and John Cage form an allegorical parallelism between music and literature, showing their shared epistemological difficulties: how to write critical musicology in the wake of Arnold Schoenberg's "new music" (Jean-François Lyotard's question) and how to read after the novelty of (Kafka's) "new" literature. In both cases, ever-proliferating compartmentalizations disciplining sound and thought vie over what determines the intelligible and its proper interpretation. Mowitt reads Cage's and Kafka's works (especially "Das Schweigen der Sirenen") through the work of Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Althusser, to debunk the purported opposites of silence and to propose that only through a reconceptualization of "influence" and "inscription" beyond the cage of linear causal reductionism can critical musicology and literary criticism articulate the cunning means by which to theorize the "new" music and literature.

Dimitris Vardoulakis's "'The Fall is the proof of our freedom': Mediated Freedom in Kafka" reads the cages in "A Report to an Academy" and "The Fasting Artist" against the background of Levinas's critique of the humanist ideal of freedom as the clear-cut opposite of confinement. Vardoulakis shows that in both short stories, laughter collapses this ostensible opposition, leading to disembodiment and the loss of singularity, thereby undermining the further canonical oppositions between, on the one hand, the empirical, finitude, and singularity, and, on the other hand, the abstract, infinity, and the universal. Rather, Vardoulakis argues, singularity is the way that the empirical and the limitless are held in a productive and yet irresolvable suspension that allows Kafka's cages to intertwine judgment, singularity, and mediated freedom.

By rereading (*re-legare*) Kafka's 1918 fragment "Die besitzlose Arbeiterschaft," Peter Fenves offers in "'Workforce without Possessions': Kafka, 'Social Justice,' and the Word *Religion*" a radical redefinition of "religion." Fenves argues that Kafka's fragment is not a defense of either the October Revolution or any Zionist or socialist and communist programs in Kafka's time—which, at best, aimed at an equal distribution of goods among their peoples—but a universalist manifesto against the cage of any possession whatsoever, by dint of the fact that for religion possession is simply impossible. The *res religiosae* postulates that a thing that belongs to someone must become no one's, and since prior to be acquired by someone, everything belonged to no one, "no one" is the sole just proprietor of everything "religious." Kafka's "Workforce" is a bond [*re-ligare*] among those who in the eyes of the law are no one, so that what belongs to them is made "religious." Only former-proprieters-become-workers-without-possessions can make the world religious.

In "Kafkaesque: (Secular) Kabbalah and Allegory," A. Kiarina Kordela invokes Kant, Benjamin, and Lacan, as well as obliquely Spinoza and Marx, to unravel the logical structures of kabbalist thought and allegory as philosophical and literary modes specific to secular epistemological exigencies. Albeit Kantian in its mission, the Kafkaesque, as a specific allegorical mode, revises transcendental criticism by constructing empirical reality as the unknowable index of its own transcendental Truth and Law, thereby challenging the postmodern epistemological confinement in cultural relativism. In her dialogue with other thinkers, such as Weber, Blanchot, Foucault, Deleuze, Jameson, and Žižek, Kordela morphs the Kafkaesque into a blueprint of concepts that range from parable, desire, and redemption to set theory, the gaze, and perversion.

In Ross Shields's "The Ethics and Beauty of *The Trial*: Kafka's Circumscription of Failure," the paradoxes and failures so characteristic of Kafka's writings take on the significance of expressing allegorically the specific modes of failure of the sexed subject and the apparatus of imprisonment that delineate his or her limits. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's work on Kafka and on Lacan's topology in his seminar on ethics, Shields identifies a paradigm shift in *The Trial* from the transcendent totality and objective rationality of the male position of enunciation to the immanent incompleteness and impossible desire of the female position of enunciation. This shift entails a reconceptualization of desire, beauty, ethics, and their interrelations.

In Karyn Ball's "Kafka's Fatal Performatives: Between 'Bad Conscience' and Betrayed Vulnerability," a stichomythia between Kafka and Nietzsche reveals the latter's "fatalism" as a double mechanism of fatal performativity, in which proclaimed guilt is internalized as one's own desire, while the

moral values purported to ground laws are themselves the effects of the laws they ground. The (post-)modern quasi universalization of the cage, in which one can be arrested without charge or trial, is not reducible to either Nietzsche's "bad conscience" or Freud's human instinctual aggression (Nietzsche's primal vitality). In this context, as Ball's reading of Kafka, and particularly *The Metamorphosis*, shows, art is confined to refracting a death-driven modernity, but only by itself executing the fatal performative it stages; thus, it itself dies as a figural world, while its demand for solidarity outlives it to reproach us (readers), now.

In "How Is the Trapeze Possible?" Christophe Bident's reading of Kafka's 1921–1922 story "First Sorrow" shows that, unlike any actual trapeze artist, the *essence* of the trapeze artist consists in desiring nothing other than trapezes, so that the trapeze artist's desire coincides with his prison. Bident links Kafka's story to the 2005 show *I Look Up, I Look Down*, in which trapeze artists Chloé Moglia and Mélissa Von Vépy pierce through the aerial cage of the trapeze-artist-being by means of the (philosophical) voice. Through this encounter of the spectacle and the voices of Bachelard, Deleuze, or Jankélévitch, a narrative emerges that questions all possible borders, from that between desire and risk, physical performance and meaning, physics and metaphysics, to poetics and politics.

Henry Sussman's "With Impunity" traces the narrative chiasma of rhetoric and (political) act in Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, through which impunity emerges as the performative tact and fundamental attitude of biopolitical power. In Sussman's reading of *The Castle*, its official is endowed with the same impunity that marks both Agamben's biopolitical power and Weber's charismatic leader. In the biopolitical coincidence of body and law, of which Kafka offers unparalleled fictitious descriptions, bureaucratic mechanisms, not unlike those of the camps, become a digital (i.e., purely relational/syntactical) readout to what was once an ecology of analog (i.e., meaningful) relations. By invoking Jacques Derrida, Sussman appeals to the university's and psychoanalysis' "unconditional" freedom of expression as the sole sites of a potentially revolutionary impunity against the extant rule of totalitarian impunity.