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The mind as an inner fortress

Schizophrenia and hyperreflexivity in Kafka's *The Castle*

Literary scholar Edwin Burgum once said that Kafka's personality verged on the psychopathic and predicted that sooner or later psychiatrists would discover his novels as rewarding objects of investigation.[1] This article indeed approaches one of Kafka's novels from a psychiatric perspective: applying the ideas of Louis Sass's renowned *Madness and Modernism*, we read *Das Schloß* (*The Castle*) as the story of an excessively self-conscious person who withdraws into his mind and becomes alienated from the world, other human beings, and even himself. In the interpretation proposed here, the novel's castle exists only in the private world of K.'s mind, as an inner fortress where he fights all kinds of imaginary battles. It is both a symbol of flight, a defense against a world in which he doesn't feel at home, and one of pride, since K. considers his inner castle a far better place than the outside world.

In what follows, we start with a brief methodological note, explaining how a phenomenological approach can provide insight into the subjective dimension of psychiatric conditions. After briefly summarising the contents of the novel and mentioning some common interpretations of it, we then proceed to discuss the main ideas of Louis Sass's *Madness and Modernism* and go on to apply these ideas to Kafka's novel, arguing that K. exemplifies the so-called schizoid personality type, suffering from a relatively mild form of schizophrenia.

The purpose of this article is to argue that a phenomenological analysis of Kafka's novel may contribute to a better understanding of the schizoid personality type. More generally, by investigating schizophrenia using philosophical ideas and a literary representation, we aim to demonstrate how a 'health humanities' approach can provide a better understanding of the subjective and existential dimensions of psychiatric conditions, thereby forming a useful complement to biopsychiatric perspectives.

Phenomenological approaches to psychiatric disorders

The way in which psychiatric problems are approached and treated, is closely related to perceptions of what a human being is. In the currently dominant view, psychiatric conditions are seen as brain disorders and usually treated with psychopharmaceutical medication. This biopsychiatric approach comes from the conviction that before all, humans are material beings with certain (biological, genetic, chemical,

[1] Quoted in: R. Gray, *Kafka's Castle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 8.

neurological, etc.) characteristics that determine their behaviour: psychiatric problems are believed to be caused by brain conditions such as neurotransmitter- or hormonal imbalances, or by genetically determined neurological conditions.

Recently, however, this view has increasingly been challenged. One of the reasons for this is that the ambition of 'the decade of the brain' (the 1990s), namely that of a complete understanding of the correspondence between psychiatric disorders and processes in the brain, has not been realised at all. According to critics, this ambition was unachievable anyway, because humans are more than just their physical properties: they are also self-interpreting beings who are part of a *Lebenswelt*.[2] This is the view of humans put forward in the hermeneutic anthropology of philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, and Marya Schechtman. In line with this view proposals have been made, both by psychiatrists and philosophers, to give more attention to the subjective and existential dimensions of psychiatric conditions. Psychiatric disorders, they say, are not only about biochemical and neurological processes in the brain, but also about the way people relate to themselves, their experiences and their (personal-, social-, cultural-, etc.) environment. Well-known psychiatrists like the Dutch Jim van Os and the American Bradley Lewis have therefore in their work argued for a patient-centred approach to psychiatric conditions that recognises that mental suffering is highly dependent on contextual factors. From a more theoretical point of view, the work of, among others, philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe is important. In books such as *Feelings of Being* (2008), he uses phenomenological methods to investigate what it means for patients to live with a psychiatric disorder, discussing, for example, changes in how patients experience time, space, their bodies, and their self-perception.[3]

Whereas biological psychiatry is characterised by a focus on the human body as an object and is aimed at *explaining* disease processes, phenomenology focuses on the patient's subjective and existential experience of his or her condition and thus on a better *understanding* of what it is like to be, for example, in a schizoid or psychotic state. It tries to look from the perspective of a patient rather than from the outside. The phenomenologist searches not so much for *causes* as for the possible *meaning* of psychiatric unusual behaviour, which he refuses to see as merely resulting from some brain defect. This approach is descriptive, comparative and interpretative, aimed at better understanding the patient rather than causally explaining his or her behaviour.

Phenomenological approaches have recently enjoyed an increasing interest among philosophers, psychiatrists, psychologists and other scientists.[4] Qualitative research methods such as IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) and EPR (Existential Phenomenological Research) are

[2] The concept of *Lebenswelt* was used by philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger to refer to the world of human experience, as opposed to the empirical world that can be scientifically researched. The term is used here to refer to the biographical, social, historical, and cultural factors that form the context of human life.
[3] M. Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being. Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[4] For a recent discussion, see for example: L. Spencer, M. Broome & G. Stanghellini, 'The future of phenomenological psychopathology', *Philosophical Psychology*, 38:1 (2025) pp. 1-16.

built on ideas from phenomenology (describing the way in which the individual experiences his or her situation) and hermeneutics (interpreting the meaning of these experiences). Their focus is therefore on gaining a better understanding of how individual psychiatric patients experience and interpret their condition in relation to their lives and their world. The approach is idiographic (using case studies) rather than nomothetic (aimed at general laws), the underlying conviction being that the careful examination of individual cases, focusing on the way in which psychiatric conditions manifest themselves in the individual consciousness of a particular person within a particular context, can contribute to a better understanding of these conditions. This is in line with the increasing importance recently attributed to experiential expertise as a source of knowledge and, related to that, the interest in less hierarchical and more patient-centred approaches, such as 'co-creation' between patients and professionals in diagnosis and treatment.

Furthermore, the phenomenological analysis of case studies may come from fiction as well as from real life: according to, among others, Bradley Lewis, fictional characters can be, as representations of human experience, highly useful in thought experiments that aim to enhance our understanding of the experience and treatment of psychiatric illnesses. For example, in one of his books on phenomenological psychiatry, Lewis uses stories by Anton Chekhov and Chitra Divakaruni to express his ideas and explore hypothetical scenarios for clinical practice.[5]

It is not a question of one view being better than the other: the (nomothetic, quantitative) biopsychiatric and (idiographic, qualitative) phenomenological approaches may complement one another very well. In fact the interdisciplinary field of 'health humanities' is based on the idea that literature and the arts (as well as humanities disciplines such as philosophy, history and cultural studies) can play a significant role in thinking about illness and health, not as a replacement but as a complement to medical science. In this article, we intend to illustrate this through a phenomenological analysis of Kafka's novel.

Kafka's novel *The Castle*

A man in his thirties known only as 'K.' arrives late in the evening of a winter day in a village. He claims to be a land surveyor appointed by the authorities of the castle nearby the village. Immediately all kinds of questions and complications arise: has K. indeed been appointed as a land surveyor, is there some misunderstanding, or is K. perhaps bluffing? Throughout the novel, K. strives to gain recognition from the castle authorities. He tries so in various ways, but all his stratagems fail. He seduces the barmaid Frieda, who is a former mistress of the castle authority Klamm, hoping to get access to Klamm this way. Two assistants from the castle, Jeremiah and Arthur, are assigned to K., but prove rather useless because

[5] B. Lewis, *Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can Shape Clinical Practice* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2011). See, in particular, Chapter 1 ('Listening to Chekhov') and Chapter 5 ('Mrs. Dutta and the Literary Case') for examples of the way Lewis uses fiction in his approach of psychiatry.

of their clownish behaviour. K. tries to get help from Barnabas, who works for the castle as a messenger, but this mainly results in endless conversations about the troubles Barnabas' family got into after his sister Amalia rejected the advances of a castle official.

Throughout the novel, strange, dreamlike, and surreal events follow one another. The night of K.'s first visit to the Count's Arms inn, he and Frieda make love on the floor behind the bar, between puddles of beer and with the assistants sitting on the tap. When K. visits the mayor in order to get clarification about his status, the latter receives him in bed and tells him that a land surveyor was indeed asked for, but that was a long time ago and by now there is no longer work in that field; however, K. may get a job as caretaker at the local school, where he can live and sleep in a classroom with Frieda and the two assistants. After Frieda understands that K. not really loves her and is only using her for his own purposes, she begins an affair with one of the assistants. When K. is interviewed by castle secretary Bürgel, an interview that takes place in the Count's Arms in the middle of the night in a very large bed that almost entirely fills the room, K. unexpectedly is offered help, but falls asleep. And during all these and many other bizarre events, everyone, especially K. himself, produces endless monologues, torrents of words analysing the situation and all possible scenarios with great precision and in extensive detail.

What, then, could be the meaning of this intriguing novel, which is both comical due to the absurdity of the events and terrifying due to the eerie feeling of strangeness and alienation it evokes? Kafka's work in general, and *The Castle* in particular, has been interpreted in widely varying ways.[6] Some read it as a satire on bureaucracy, K. being hopelessly entangled in the nets of an invisible and elusive organisation. Several critics focus on the Freudian and psychoanalytic aspects of the story, the castle representing the all-powerful father figure. In the Marxist interpretation, K. as a land surveyor symbolises the revolution, aiming to redistribute the lands. The Jewish interpretation considers K. a 'wandering Jew' searching for a place on earth. According to Milan Kundera, both *The Trial* and *The Castle* are about the loss of private life and the depersonalisation of the individual being in modern society: 'Not the curse of solitude but the *violation of solitude* is Kafka's obsession!'[7] Existentialist interpretations view K.'s struggle as an individual quest, the castle symbolizing a personal destiny or 'true self' that he is trying to attain. The surrealist interpretation stresses the dreamlike and absurd world of the Kafka novels. The two most common interpretations, however, are the religious and totalitarian ones. In the religious interpretation, the castle stands for some transcendent reality, a God K. longs for and aims at. Finally, according to the totalitarian interpretation, Kafka somehow 'foresaw' the horrors

[6] The literature on Kafka and interpretations of his novels is vast. Relatively recent and useful collections of essays are: J. Preece ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. Rolleston ed., *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka* (Rochester: Camden House, 2002); and S. Corngold and R. Gross ed., *Kafka for the Twenty-first Century* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011). Interesting as well remains: P. Neumeyer ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Castle: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

[7] M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 111. Italics by Kundera.

of the 20th-century totalitarian regimes, describing in astonishing detail the mechanics of a state that sees and controls everything.

Without intending to challenge the validity of these and other existing interpretations and the many possible combinations of these, another perspective is suggested here. In line with the work by Louis Sass, we propose to see the story of K. as the report of a psychiatric struggle.[8] To all appearances, K. shows schizoid (this term will be clarified below) behaviour. He is an extremely self-conscious and overly reflexive person that withdraws and alienates from the world and takes refuge in the inner castle of his mind where, using language as arms, he fights his private battles in an imaginary world of his own.

Louis Sass's *Madness and Modernism*

Madness and Modernism (1994, slightly revised in 2017), written by clinical psychologist Louis Sass, is a highly original book that makes one look at psychiatric conditions with different eyes.[9] Approaching the subject from different disciplines simultaneously, a new and intriguing point of view is presented. The thesis that Sass puts forward is remarkable: namely, that there are strong parallels between schizophrenia as a psychiatric condition and modernism and postmodernism as literary and artistic movements. Sass substantiates this thesis by comparing schizophrenic patient experiences with numerous examples from 19th- and especially 20th century art, literature and philosophy. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*. As a common factor between madness and modernism, he introduces the notion of *hyperreflexivity*: according to Sass, both schizophrenia and manifestations of (post)modernism involve a heightened level of consciousness and an extreme cerebral activity. These are often accompanied by withdrawal and alienation, both from the world and other human beings as well as from oneself. This can lead to creative new ways of looking at the world and the self; but it can also degenerate into reason running wild, where all common sense is abandoned and one loses oneself in self-created fantasies, delusions and ultimately psychoses.

Sass uses the label 'schizophrenia' as an umbrella term rather than as a specific disorder. There are various forms of schizophrenia, the common factor of which is a more or less distorted perception of the self and the world.[10] Moreover, there is a spectrum: schizophrenic symptoms can vary from relatively mild forms of heightened reflexivity and alienation, via various sorts of cognitive, perceptual

[8] There are few studies that approach *The Castle* from the point of view of 'madness'. An exception, wherein *The Castle* is interpreted through a Foucauldian understanding of madness as a social construction, is: J. Breeding, *The Power of Madness: A Foucauldian Reading of Kafka's* The Castle *and Other Works* (Tennessee: University of Tennessee Publishing, 2016). More generally, the 'madness' in Kafka's work has in several studies been interpreted as an expression of societal alienation, or a form of rebellion against oppressive systems. My analysis, however, will be phenomenological rather than Foucauldian.

[9] L. Sass, *Madness and Modernism. Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[10] Sass stresses the 'extreme diversity' of schizophrenia and thinks it 'defies all attempts to bring its features within the grasp of any overarching theory or model'. Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, pp. 11-12.

and linguistic distortions, to grave delusions and hallucinations with severely disturbed ways of thinking and feeling. The most serious form is psychosis, a condition in which the experience of time, space, causality and identity is completely altered, and the patient seems to inhabit another universe. For the purposes of this article, we will mostly focus on relatively mild forms of schizophrenia and the way these relate to Kafka and his protagonist K.

The method used by Sass is phenomenological and comparative: he intends to investigate what the consciousness (the subjective life) of a schizophrenic person looks like and what forms of behaviour this leads to, using modernist works of literature and art to help this understanding. His concern is not to explain (causally) how schizophrenia arises or develops as an illness, but rather to describe schizophrenic behaviour and show its affinities with modernism. The approach is thus descriptive and interpretative, aimed at better understanding what the schizophrenic person experiences. As we will see, Sass refuses to regard schizophrenic behaviour as the incomprehensible manifestations of some defect.

Hyperreflexivity and alienation

According to Sass, there have traditionally been three ways of looking at schizophrenia.[11] The first is the assumption that the illness of the mind is caused by a defect in the brain: something is 'broken', which makes you different or even 'mad'. This physicalist view is of course dominant in our time, in the form of neuroscientific and biopsychiatric approaches that try to relate (strange, disturbed) behaviour to concrete physical substrata such as specific brain areas or hormones such as dopamine and serotonin. A second view is the Freudian one, wherein madness is interpreted as a regression, a return to a more primitive phase of childhood in which there is not yet a strict demarcation between self and world and the two merge into one another, and in which idiosyncratic forms of behaviour may be interpreted as defense mechanisms. And a third way in which schizophrenia is sometimes approached is its glorification: the supposedly insane person is not actually crazy, but rather someone who refuses to follow the path of our rationality and (over-)civilisation, a hero of the emotions, the passions and the vital. This positive view of Nietzsche's 'Dionysian savage' can be found, for example, in certain forms of Romanticism, in the cult of the 'mad genius', and in the 20th-century anti-psychiatric movement.

What these three traditional views have in common, is the conviction that the schizophrenic person is less able of logical thought and abstract reasoning and has a diminished (self-)consciousness. The *valuation* may differ (it can be interpreted as a defect, a regression, or as something positive), but the *assessment* is the same: something is not in normal order. Sass, however, approaches schizophrenia in a completely different and even opposite way: not as the result of a defect or regression, but as an expression of *hyperreflexivity*. By this he means the excessive attention that is given to one's own

[11] What follows is a brief summary of Sass's views. Subsequent references to Sass's book will be mentioned in the text by using page numbers between parentheses.

processes of perception, thinking and (self-)consciousness. Everyday self-evidence and common sense are cast aside and make way for endless reflections, considerations and problematisations. A strongly heightened (self-) consciousness and cognitive overactivity result in an alienation from the world and the self. The schizophrenic person withdraws from the world and social environment into himself and his own thoughts.[12] Rather than a *disappearance* of reason, there is a *hyperactivity* of reason; rather than a form of irrationality, schizophrenia is a 'Socratic disease' characterised by hyperrationality, whereby a healthy anchoring in the living world, and with it common sense, is lost. As Chesterton quipped, 'The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason'.

The goal of Sass's argument is thus 'to illuminate the unusual intensified forms of consciousness or subjective life […] together with associated alienation and withdrawal – not only from the surrounding world and other human beings, but also from one's thoughts, feelings and bodily presence' (p. ix). Thus seen, the two main characteristics of the schizophrenic person are hyperreflexivity and alienation. These two factors are of course intimately related: the hyperreflexive mind is continuously busy building its own private world, thus estranging from the real world and often also from oneself. This estrangement may take the form of disturbances of the spatial and temporal ordering of the world, an altered sense of self, or the simultaneous existence of 'inner' and 'outer/public' selves (pp. xiii, 71-75). Often there is an extreme form of inwardness, a solipsism that denies the reality or relevance of the external world (p. 20). This way, the schizophrenic finds shelter in his private inner world, where he may lead 'a dream life, fantastic, "poor in deeds and rich in thought"'.[13] This may be a defense mechanism against 'the harsh, strong colours and tones of everyday life' (p. 60); or, contrary, it may be an expression of feelings of superiority and the conviction that one's own inner world is far better than the outside one. Either way, there is a 'hypertrophy of consciousness' that forms a detachment from the vital sources of life such as emotions and bodily feelings (p. 51). As we will see below, Sass finds these characteristics of hyperreflexivity and alienation both in schizophrenic patients as well as in modernist works of art and literature.

The schizoid personality type

The *schizoid* as discussed by Sass refers to a personality first discussed by psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler in 1910 and later defined by psychiatrist R.D. Laing in his book *The Divided Self* (1960). The schizoid is an individual who manifests a relatively mild form of schizophrenia in being mildly alienated both from the world and his fellow beings and from himself. In the words of Laing: 'The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent

[12] The schizophrenic is referred to as a 'he' throughout this article, because schizophrenia is slightly more common among men (about 6 of every 10 cases). It goes without saying, however, that every occurrence of 'he' can also be read as 'she'.
[13] This formulation is from the German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer, who quotes Hölderlin (Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 60).

in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself "together with" others or "at home in" the world'.[14] Generally speaking, schizoid behaviour may manifest itself in symptoms such as non-social behaviour; a strong tendency towards inwardness; indifference to the opinions of others; 'disharmony' with a world that feels unfamiliar, strange and distorted; being overly cerebral; and an 'internal multiplicity' in the sense of a fragmented or multifaceted identity. Characteristic of the schizoid is a heightened consciousness and reflexivity: the schizoid person very much lives in his head, where he builds a world of his own, a world with rules of its own. At the same time, in seeming contrast with his withdrawn and apparently overly rational behaviour, beneath his surface a schizoid person may be extremely sensitive and vulnerable. According to the early 20th-century psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer, the schizoid personality is in this sense 'full of antitheses' (p. 57).

It is important to note that while a schizophrenic patient suffering from psychosis is clearly seriously ill, the behaviour of a schizoid personality can often be interpreted as related to specific character traits rather than to an illness. Sass remarks in this respect that the schizoid and schizophrenic characteristics seem to exist on a continuum: the schizoid personality is a character type that can function fairly well, but at the same time, due to its personality traits, may be prone to developing more serious symptoms or even severe schizophrenic behaviour, such as delusions or hallucinations. Considered this way, schizoid traits are milder versions of what may develop into overt schizophrenia or even psychosis.[15]

Regarding the above-mentioned point that schizoid individuals often have specific rules and customs for their self-created private inner world, what Sass writes about their use of language is very interesting. Typical for the way the schizoid person expresses himself is that he might use a 'private language' in which the normal communicative, social function of language disappears into the background. This different usage of language has nothing to do with regression or brain damage (the traditional explanations): rather, it is a kind of 'style difference'. The language use of the schizoid person is often complex and self-reflexive, rich in meanings, abstractions and associations and in a way very playful. As we will see below, Kafka's K. shows just such a highly idiosyncratic language style.

As an aside, we should mention that what Sass refers to as the character traits of a schizoid personality, differs from both the so-called 'schizoid personality disorder' and 'schizotypal personality disorder' of DSM-5.[16] The DSM-5 schizoid is characterised by solitariness, emotional coldness and a lack of interest in social relationships; while the DSM-5 schizotypal is typified by (amongst other

[14] R. Laing, *The Divided Self. A Study of Sanity and Madness* (Chicago: Quadrangle-Tavistock, 1960), p. 15. Sass describes the schizoid personality in Chapter 3 of *Madness and Modernism* (pp. 56-61).
[15] 'The schizoid type is by far the most common prepsychotic personality', writes Sass (p. 54). The view of a continuum between the schizoid and the schizophrenic is criticised, however, by psychiatrists who believe there is a fundamental gap rather than a continuum between the two (pp. 79-80). For purposes of brevity, we will henceforth use the term 'schizophrenic' for the whole of the spectrum, including the schizoid personality.
[16] DSM-5 is the current version of the diagnostic handbook for psychiatric disorders that is used in most countries as a standard for diagnosing psychiatric conditions.

characteristics) strange perceptual experiences, strange beliefs ('magical thinking'), strange behaviour, paranoid fears and an extreme suspiciousness. As we discussed above and will see below in the context of Kafka's work, the schizoid personality we discuss in this article, is a far more multidimensional and complex type than the reclusive schizoid of DSM-5, and also does not coincide (although there are overlaps) with the DSM-5 schizotypal.[17] In this article, we use the term schizoid as we described it above, thus in the way Sass and Laing do.

Schizophrenia, hyperreflexivity and modernism

As we mentioned, Sass argues that many parallels can be seen between on the one hand the schizoid personality type and schizophrenic behaviour, and on the other hand literary and artistic modernism. Analysing modernist works of art and literature may thus provide us with more insight into the subjective experience of schizophrenia. According to Sass, the hyperconscious and hyperreflexive self and its feelings of alienation are clearly present in the modernist movement, which he considers a 'radical aesthetic of isolation and detachment' (p. 58).[18] Consider, for example, Roquentin, the protagonist in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, who sees normal reality crumbling away in the famous passage in which he stares at an oak tree; or the strange and oppressive atmosphere in the paintings of De Chirico; or the estranging 'modernist stare' in the Futurist and Surrealist works of art; or the alienation of the characters in the novels by Beckett, such as the confused and introverted Watt, who suffers from insomnia, hyperconsciousness and an extreme attention to detail. Hyperreflexivity in combination with withdrawal from the world is also present in Viriginia Woolf, who in 'stream of consciousness' novels such as *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse* expresses an extreme inwardness; or, in another way, in Baudelaire, who responds to his *spleen* with a detached and superior aestheticism. And of course, Kafka as well comes to mind in this respect: protagonists like Georg Bendemann, Gregor Samsa, Joseph K. and K. seem to be lost in their own minds and completely alienated from the world.

The Castle **as a representation of the schizoid personality type**

In a brief section on Kafka, Sass makes some remarks about the latter's work. However, he does not analyse *The Castle*, which is what we will do below, where we intend to show how Kafka's protagonist K. illustrates the schizoid personality exactly as Sass describes it: K. is introverted, self-sufficient, hyperconscious and hyperreflexive, withdraws into the inner world of his mind and alienates both from

[17] The schizoid type we are discussing shows some similarities with the DSM-5 'Avoidant Personality Disorder'.
[18] Of course, what Sass refers to as the 'modernist movement' is in fact a very broad range of literary and artistic currents like Surrealism, literary modernism, Futurism, Dadaism, Cubism, etc. However, Sass believes that these various modernist currents share the common characteristics of hyperconsciousness and hyperreflexivity.

the outer world and from himself. But before discussing K., it is worthwhile first to have a look at his creator.

Franz Kafka as a schizoid personality

Although one must always be very cautious when drawing parallels between a writer's work and his or her biography, in Kafka's case the parallels are so obvious that they are difficult to ignore. Indeed Sass refers to Kafka's fictions as 'allegorisations of personal experience' and 'parables' of his condition of anxiety and guilt feelings.[19] The cultural, linguistic, political and broader cultural context in which Kafka's work originated, very well may have contributed to his feelings of alienation and hyperreflexivity. Kafka was born into a middle-class, German-speaking Czech Jewish family in Prague. The tensions between the German and Czech cultures in Prague and his struggle with his Jewish identity were sources of both personal and intellectual conflict throughout his life. Furthermore, during his lifetime he saw major political transformations: his native Bohemia changed from being part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to becoming the capital of the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia.

Kafka's letters and diaries as well as the testimonials of those who knew him, present the image of an extremely self-conscious, reserved, shy, hypersensitive and solitary man, whose existential loneliness pervades his life as well as his work.[20] In his diary, Kafka mentioned solitude as 'the power over me which never fails', referring to an empty space 'between me and everything else […] which I make no attempt at all to pierce'.[21] 'I'm so afraid of them', Kafka wrote about the other people in one of his letters to Milena, one of the women he had an intense affair with and who knew him well.[22] In his monograph, Klaus Wagenbach refers to a classmate who said that a 'glass wall' separated Kafka from the world.[23]

In addition to a tendency towards solitude and withdrawal, among Kafka's most poignant character traits were also melancholy and existential *Angst*. To Max Brod, he said that he felt within him 'a heaviness like that of the earth itself'.[24] In a letter to his then fiancée Felice, he wrote about fear as 'the basic feeling I have towards people'.[25] In several of his letters to Milena he expressed his *Angst* in a most penetrating way. Fear is 'my very essence', he wrote, 'it really is part of me and perhaps the best part'; and on another occasion he said that 'this fear is particularly mysterious; I do not know its inner

[19] Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, pp. 59, 61.
[20] For a discussion of the parallels between Kafka's life and work see, among many others: R. Stach, *Kafka. The Years of Insight* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); M. Brod, *Franz Kafka* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1983); and N. Murray, *Kafka* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). For example, see pp. 29 and 75 of the latter.
[21] These quotations are from: Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 59.
[22] F. Kafka, P. Boehm (transl.), *Letters to Milena* (New York: Schocken, 1990), p. 204.
[23] K. Wagenbach, *Kafka* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 31.
[24] Brod, *Franz Kafka*, p. 15 (my translation).
[25] Quoted in: Murray, *Kafka*, p. 177.

laws, only its hand on my throat – and that really is *the most terrible thing I have ever experienced or could experience*'.[26]

It is thus clear that Kafka was an extremely self-conscious person who felt fundamentally different and distant from others and who had a strong tendency to withdraw. Daily life felt strange and unreal to him: 'All is imaginary – family, office, friends, the street, all imaginary', he wrote in his diary, 'the truth that lies closest, however, is only this, that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell'.[27] Someone like that is not very well fit for normal life. Milena said to Max Brod that 'Franz cannot live. Franz does not have the capacity for living', adding that 'He possesses not the slightest refuge. For that reason he is exposed to all those things against which we are protected. He is like a naked man among a multitude who are dressed'.[28]

Kafka as a person obviously fits the description of a schizoid personality we discussed above. According to the German psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer (in his 1921 book *Physique and Character*), such people 'close the shutters of their houses, in order to lead a dream-life […] in the soft muffled gloom of the interior'.[29] That is in fact precisely what Kafka did: not very well suited for life, he chose escaping that life through his literature, which offered him an 'aesthetic of isolation and detachment'.[30] His dreamlike stories are expressions of 'highly obsessional and anxiety-laden thoughts' and of 'weakness and vulnerability'.[31] Like Kafka himself, his protagonists (such as Joseph K. in *The Trial*, K. in *The Castle*, Georg Bendemann in *The Judgment* and Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*) feel anxious and guilty, or (like the character in the story *The Burrow*) try to escape and hide. However, this vulnerability and detachment also has a flip side: 'a deep sense of aristocratic superiority', which Sass illustrates with citations from Kafka's letters and diaries that show his self-satisfied indifference towards everything except literature.[32] We will come back to this below in the context of *The Castle*, where K. shows an aristocratic aloofness similar to that of Kafka.

To sum up, we see that there is every reason to draw a strong parallel between Kafka himself as a schizoid personality and the world of his stories. In the latter, the schizoid type can be found time and again, for example in K., as we will see below. 'The novel is me, my stories are me', Kafka wrote to Felice, referring on another occasion to 'this world in my head , this world straining to be released'.[33] In his diary, he also expressed his desire of 'portraying my dreamlike inner life'.[34] 'I have no literary interests', he wrote to Felice in August 1913, 'but am made of literature, I am nothing else, and cannot

[26] Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, pp. 43, 150, 101 (italics by Kafka).
[27] Quoted in: Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, pp. 70, 388.
[28] Quoted in: Murray, *Kafka*, p. 318.
[29] Sass quotes Kretschmer in: Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 60.
[30] Ibid., p. 58.
[31] Ibid., p. 61.
[32] Ibid., p. 61.
[33] F. Kafka, E. Heller and J. Born (ed.), J. Stern and E. Duckworth (transl.), *Letters to Felice* (New York: Schocken, 2016), pp. 138, 275.
[34] F. Kafka, *The Diaries 1910-1923* (New York: Schocken, 1988), p. 302.

be anything else'.[35] All this illustrates the strong connections that exist between Kafka's life and his work.

Castle Head (2014)[36]

The world of K.: an inner castle built from language

As we discussed, the schizoid personality has as its main characteristics a heightened level of consciousness and reflexivity, a cerebral overactivity that is accompanied by an alienation from the world and the self. The schizoid person loses himself in thoughts, problematisations and deliberations, withdrawing himself from the world as it is into an inner fantasy world with self-made rules and customs. In doing so, the schizoid person sometimes uses a 'private language' of some sort in order to express this personal world.

Returning now to the novel, we see that all of this actually corresponds very well with the situation and experiences of K., who appears to be living in a private and idiosyncratic world of his own, a surreal and dreamlike world that emerges from his overactive consciousness. In the interpretation proposed here, the novel's castle only exists in K.'s hyperreflexive mind, not in the real world: it is an interior fortress. This inner citadel is built from language: everyone in the novel talks and reasons constantly, in exactly the same verbose manner and in phrases and arguments that are as eloquent as they are well thought-out and detailed. Whether it be Barnabas, the landlady, Olga, Frieda, Pepi, Bürgel, the mayor, the schoolmaster, or one of the others: all characters orate endlessly in precisely the same lofty style, which is that of K. himself. A few examples to illustrate this special role of language.

[35] Kafka, *Letters to Felice*, p. xv.

[36] Painting by Melissa Monroe (melissamonroeart.com), image published with permission from the artist.The image is a striking representation of the main thesis put forward in this article: there is no castle in the outside world, as it only exists in K.'s head.

When K. asks for a sleeping place in the Count's Arms, the innkeeper says: 'I should be delighted to oblige you, but even apart from the stringency of the rules, which you speak of as a stranger would, it is also not feasible because the gentlemen [from the castle] are extremely sensitive. I'm convinced they could never, at least not without warning, stand the sight of a stranger, so if I did let you spend the night here and by some accident – and accidents are always in the gentlemen's favour – you were discovered, not only should I be lost but so would you. It sounds absurd, but it's true'.[37] The landlady of the inn by the bridge warns K. that he should not ruin Frieda's life, saying: 'You snatched Frieda away from the most blissful circumstances she had ever known, and what enabled you to do so was mainly that Frieda, in her childishly exaggerated compassion, couldn't stand seeing you on Olga's arm, looking as if you were at the mercy of Barnabas' family. She came to your rescue, sacrificing herself in the process. And now that it's happened and Frieda has exchanged everything she had for the happiness of sitting on your knee, now you come along and play as your trump card the fact that you once had the opportunity to spend the night at Barnabas' place' (p. 49). And this is how Bürgel explains why many hearings take place at night: 'All right, nowhere are night-time examinations actually prescribed, so a person is not violating any rule in seeking to avoid them, but circumstances, the vast amount of work, the way officials are employed in the castle, the difficulty of getting hold of them, the rule that examination of parties is to take place only after the rest of the investigation has been completed in full, but must then be conducted immediately, all these things and others too have made night-time examinations an unavoidable necessity. However, if they have become a necessity – this is what I say – it's partly, at least indirectly, a consequence of the rules, and carping at the fact of night-time examinations would be almost tantamount – I exaggerate slightly, of course, the reason being that as an exaggeration I'm permitted to voice it – would be tantamount to carping at the rules themselves' (p. 234).

What matters in examples like the ones given above is not what they precisely mean within the context of the story, but rather the sort of language used: all characters, whether it be innkeepers, barmaids or secretaries, speak in an elaborate, unnatural, somewhat archaic, stiff and official manner, using long and winding sentences that are highly precise and detailed and that construct a labyrinth of problems, possible solutions, side paths, and new obstacles and complications. All this talking goes on and on without ever stopping (when nobody talks, we read about the thoughts and deliberations that go on in K.'s head), for hundreds of pages, culminating in a final chapter that consists of incessant speeches by K. and Pepi, and stops midsentence.[38] It has every appearance that it is K. himself who does all this 'talking': he is playing and replaying in his head his own monologues as well as that of the other protagonists, thus thinking out imaginary scenarios and fighting imaginary battles with imaginary

[37] F. Kafka, *The Castle* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 31. Subsequent references to *The Castle* will be mentioned below by using page numbers between parentheses in the text.
[38] Kafka was not able to finish his novel, which ends with 'she spoke with an effort, it was an effort to understand her, but what she said' (p. 280).

opponents which he assumes to conspire with the authorities who supposedly make it impossible for him to reach the castle and become a land surveyor.[39]

We thus suggest that the castle, as well as the various characters in the novel, only exist in the head of the overly self-conscious and cerebral K., who has locked himself within the castle of his mind, which is a secret inner fortification only accessible to himself.[40] In fact, this is very similar to the way in which, in Kafka's other tale *The Burrow*, the hiding place of the protagonist is a psychological condition rather than a physically existing shelter. It is interesting to note in this context that the image of the self as a castle has a long tradition, from Marcus Aurelius' Stoic idea of an 'inner citadel' where one may seek refuge and protect oneself from the dangers of the world, to the 16th-century mystic St. Teresa's image (in her 1588 book *The Interior Castle*) of the soul as a castle made of a single diamond in which there are many rooms.[41]

K.'s alienation from the world

Wandering around in the castle of his mind, K. has clearly become alienated from the real world. K.'s world feels strange and surreal, and he often gives the impression of experiencing self-created fantasies rather than reality itself. Many examples can be given of events that are strange or incongruous. In his first attempt to reach the castle, K. ends up in a peasant hut where, in a room full of smoke and steam, children are playing and two bearded men are taking a bath in a huge wooden tub while a young woman breastfeeds her baby. When K. asks her who she is, she says she is 'a girl from the castle' (p. 13). Later, at the Count's Arms inn, K. sees how Frieda chases a group of subordinates from the castle with a whip and locks them up in the stable for the night. When appointed as a caretaker at the local school, K. sleeps with Frieda and the assistants in a big room that is also used for gymnastics lessons, between the gymnastics equipment and with only one straw bag for a bed; in the morning, they are woken up by the entering schoolchildren. After a few days, K. receives a letter from Klamm in which the latter praises him for the first land surveying work done by him and his assistants – but no work whatsoever has been done yet, and besides, the mayor has said that no land surveyor is needed. Absurd situations like these more seem like fantasies coming from K.'s overactive mind than like really happening events.

As a further indication of K.'s alienation from the real world, it is significant that his perception of time and space is disturbed: in the first chapter for example, he is amazed because it is getting dark, even though he had left the inn early in the morning and feels he has only been away an hour or two (p. 16). When he walks with Barnabas to his house, 'despite his best efforts' K. is unable to keep up, since

[39] Technically speaking, the thoughts and speeches of K. and the other characters are conveyed by the narrator, who in the novel is closely linked to K.'s perspective.
[40] The German title of the novel is *Das Schloss*. One of the meanings of the German word *Schloss* is a lock; the English translation 'castle' therefore loses the connotation of a place where something valuable is locked away.
[41] See the discussion in: Gray, *Kafka's Castle*, pp. 14-15.

Barnabas seems to 'fly' (p. 26), so that the latter has to drag him along; and when he later walks with Barnabas' sister Olga to the Count's Arms inn, again K. has to be 'drawn along by her' (p. 30). Another striking example of K.'s altered experience of time and space is when he makes love with Frieda and feels that 'hours passed […] in which K. constantly had the feeling that he had lost his way or wandered farther into a strange land than anyone before him, a strange land where even the air held no trace of the air at home, where a man must suffocate from the strangeness yet into whose foolish enticements he could do nothing but plunge on, getting even more lost' (p. 38).

K.'s self-alienation: paranoia, guilt feelings and multiple identities

But K. not only alienates from the world: he alienates from himself as well. We will now discuss three ways in which his self-alienation shows itself: K. loses himself in paranoid thoughts and calculations; is tormented by feelings of guilt; and seems to manifest multiple identities.

Throughout the story, K. suspects that he is under threat 'from a humiliating official system' (p. 81). 'I was taken on here as a land surveyor', he considers, 'but that was mere pretence, I was a plaything, I was driven from every house, I'm still a plaything now' (p. 178). This suspicion and paranoia are not just a vague and general feeling: K. expresses his distrust in very well thought-out and detailed reasoning in the same endless elaborations we know from speeches like those we quoted above. For example, when at the mayor's, K. suspects that the authorities are leading him astray by deliberately giving in on trivial matters: 'by being so accommodating to K. from the outset over less important matters – all that had been at issue up to now – the authorities were depriving him of the opportunity for small, easy victories and with such opportunity also the attendant satisfaction and, arising out of it, well-founded confidence for further, greater struggles. The fact was, they were letting K., if only within the confines of the village, slip through wherever he wished, spoiling and undermining him in consequence, eliminating any kind of struggle here completely and shifting him instead into the non-official, wholly unclear, clouded, alien life-sphere' (pp. 52-53).

So, K. sees plots against him everywhere and is constantly thinking of ways to dismantle the conspiracies that are being hatched against him. A few examples of K.'s unceasing attempts to see through all plots and take countermeasures, are the following. Suspecting the mayor and the schoolmaster conspire against him, K. considers approaching Brunswick [a village cobbler] as an ally: 'K. might very well receive Brunswick's backing against the schoolmaster, indeed even against the mayor, the whole official deception – because what else was it? – by means of which the mayor and the schoolmaster were keeping him from the castle authorities and had forced him into the job of school caretaker could be exposed, if it once again came to a fight over K. between Brunswick and the mayor, Brunswick would have to get K. on his side, K. would become a guest in Brunswick's house, Brunswick's instruments of power would be displaced at his disposal, in defiance of the mayor, there was no knowing how far he might advance as a result' (p. 134). To Frieda, K. says that Jeremiah has

been plotting against him: 'he's been given some commission by Galater [an official from the castle], possibly none too favourable to me, which he's trying hard to perform with what I'll admit is a certain passion for the job – it's not all that rare here – part of it being to wreck our relationship, he may have tried it in various ways, one was that he attempted to entice you with his leching, another, in which he had the landlady's backing, that he told stories about my infidelity, his attack succeeded' (p. 224). Similar complex conspiracy theories and possible plans of action, described in equally great detail in the same type of lengthy monologues that we saw above, are held by other characters: for example by Pepi, who thinks Frieda has used K. to improve her own position; and by Olga, who talks for hours (and dozens of pages) about the ways in which the castle is able to ruin the lives of those who dare to stand up against it, as her sister Amalia had done, with disastrous consequences for their family.

Another indication of K.'s inner struggles and alienation from himself, is the way K. is torn between pride and feelings of guilt. On the one hand, he is indifferent to the rules and customs of the village and, complacently ignoring all warnings, goes about his own way. K.'s self-awareness, self-confidence and sense of superiority clearly has parallels in that of his creator. 'Man cannot live without a permanent trust in something indestructible in himself', Kafka wrote in his diary; and in a letter to Felice he wrote that indifference was, apart from fear, 'the basic feeling I have towards people'.[42] But on the other hand, both Kafka and K. very well realise their arrogant conceit and pride, and suffer heavily from guilt for it. In an attempt to escape the external world, they flee into a private inner world where they try to cultivate an attitude of ironic detachment and indifference, but they never really succeed in conquering their demons. Very significant in this respect is the scene wherein K. waits in vain for Klamm at the latter's carriage, realizing 'there was nothing more futile, nothing more desperate than this freedom, this waiting, this invulnerability'.[43] Sometimes K. realises that his privately built inner castle is not only a refuge, but at the same time also a prison. He understands that his solipsism may be a mistake rather than an exercise of freedom, since the other people are not always ill-disposed towards him. An example of this is when Frieda says to him: 'If you knew with what yearning I scrutinise everything you do and say, even if it's torture to me, for an inner core in my favour' (p. 143). Max Brod remarks in this respect that two opposing tendencies competed in Kafka: the desire for solitude and the will for community.[44]

In fact, K. has every reason to feel guilty. Like Joseph K. in *The Trial*, he is not a very sympathetic person. He claims to be a land surveyor but appears to be bluffing; he is only interested in Frieda as far as she might provide him with access to Klamm, and he hides his real intentions for her ('my one value in your eyes is that I used to be Klamm's mistress', she rightly reproaches him, suggesting he uses her as 'a pledge, redeemable only at the highest price' (p. 139)); he is rude and violent

[42] The diary entry is quoted in: Gray, *Kafka's Castle*, p. 11. Murray remarks in this respect that Kafka held a 'belief in the precious freedom of the self, its inviolable particularity, its *Eigentümlichkeit*' (Murray, *Kafka*, p. 58). The letter to Felice is quoted in: Murray, *Kafka*, p. 177.
[43] Kafka, *The Castle*, p. 96; see also Gray, *Kafka's Castle*, p. 46.
[44] Brod, *Franz Kafka*, p. 97.

to his assistants, who file a complaint for assault against him with the castle authorities; he enters Klamm's sledge and drinks from his cognac; and he refuses to listen to any advice whatsoever. K. gets some opportunities to become someone in the village, but he spoils his chances of love (with Frieda), work (as a school caretaker) and recognition (by falling asleep during his conversation with Bürgel). And all the time, he indeed realises his selfishness and his guilt towards the others. Note that in all this, the point that (in our interpretation) all characters and events merely exist in K.'s mind, in no way contradicts the possibility of his guilt feelings: the various characters and events are above all outpourings of K.'s mind, and the guilt that he feels for his complacency and pride is part of this play in the theatre of his mind. In fact, the clearest expression of K.'s self-alienation is the way in which he puts on a play with multiple personalities, as we will now discuss.

As mentioned above, all characters in the novel are talking in the same particular style, in long and elaborate speeches that are eloquent, somewhat archaic, and highly detailed. Everything points to the fact that all this 'talking' and reasoning comes from K. himself, the secondary characters being mere projections of various aspects of his inner world. The landlady Gardena, for example, may represent K.'s conscience and guilt feelings: in chapters 4 and 6, she calls K. to account for causing trouble to Frieda, who has lost both her job at the Count's Arms and her friendship with Klamm through his actions, and for whom he should now take responsibility. Gardena warns K. that he seizes beyond his power with his wish to speak to Klamm, and reproaches him his haughtiness: 'You've been here a couple of days and already you think you know it all better than folk who were born here', she says, reproaching him 'not taking anyone's word for anything, ignoring even the best-intentioned advice' (p. 47), and suggesting he should show the respect that is appropriate for a newcomer. The assistants too, even more than Gardena and the other characters, hold up a mirror to K., through their joking behaviour implicitly criticizing him and showing him his pride, and later on more explicitly criticizing him by filing a complaint.[45] Another example of a character that can be seen as a projection of a part of K.'s inner life is Klamm, who expresses his thirst for power and his abuse of others for his own purposes.[46]

Conclusion: K.'s castle as the construction of a schizoid person

In *Madness and Modernism*, Louis Sass argues that modernist literature and art may contribute to the understanding of psychiatric disorders. His book is a highly stimulating plea for the value of a phenomenological approach to psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, and for the possible role of modernist works of art in this respect.[47] As we discussed, a phenomenological analysis is a qualitative

[45] See the discussion in: Gray, *Kafka's Castle*, pp. 55, 106; and: P. Bridgwater, *Kafka's Novels: An Interpretation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 273-278.
[46] Patrick Bridgwater points to the fact that the name Klamm begins with K. and is Czech for 'delusion, fallacy, error, deception, lie'. Bridgwater, *Kafka's Novels*, pp. 228, 235.
[47] Apart from his book, Sass has contributed several other publications on the phenomenology of schizophrenia. Highly interesting in the context of the current article is, for example: J. Parnas, L. Sass, 'Self, Solipsism, and

approach that concentrates on the way individuals as subjects experience their condition and make sense of their lives. In this article, these ideas were applied to Kafka's work: we discussed *The Castle* as an intriguing example of a modernist novel that evokes the subjective world of someone with a psychiatric condition. It is our belief that readings of this kind can be resourceful in mental health care, as evidenced, for example, by the increasing use of therapies such as bibliotherapy and expressive writing therapy in the treatment of schizophrenia and other psychiatric disorders.[48]

Summing up the results of our analysis, we have seen that in many respects K.'s experiences are those of the so-called schizoid personality type. K. has an extremely heightened level of consciousness and shows a cerebral overactivity. As a result of this hyperreflexivity, he gets lost in the self-created dreamworld of a castle and its rules, procedures, officials, servants and other characters. Using a kind of private theatre where every role is performed through long and highly eloquent speeches with excessively detailed descriptions of all sorts of intrigues, complications, obstacles, moves and countermoves, K. builds a labyrinthic world in his mind.

K. withdraws from the world into himself and his own thoughts. His inner world is an expression of both his fear and his pride, offering him refuge and shelter, as well as a place that is better to live in than the real world. The world of the castle is the manifestation of an extreme inwardness, a solipsism that prefers the construction of a private world to the inhabiting of the real one. However, K. has a price to pay for his inwardness: he alienates both from the world and from himself, as shows from his surreal experiences, his paranoid suspicions, his feelings of guilt, and the way in which the various characters in the world of the castle express parts of his personality.

Like Kafka himself, K. thus exhibits the characteristics and behaviour of a schizoid person. At the same time, however, he is not psychotic. Although K. clearly is alienated from the world and himself, there is no question of a complete dissolution of the world and his self. His world is bizarre and surreal, but K. remains in control of it, playing out the roles of himself and the other characters in the language theatre of his mind with a never slackening confidence, assurance and precision.

'Some books seem like a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own castle', Kafka wrote in 1903 in a letter to Oskar Pollak.[49] This is especially the case with his novel *The Castle*, which we have read as the expression of a schizoid personality: K. is overly self-conscious and reflexive, just like his creator was. In his diary, Kafka referred to 'the tremendous world I have in my head'.[50] He was 'abnormally sensitive to the damage caused by consciousness of the self', as Idris Parry writes in his introduction to

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Schizophrenic Delusions', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 8 (2001), pp. 101-120. Incidentally, Sass argues for a combination of neurobiological and phenomenological approaches to psychiatry: in his view, these two complement each other very well (Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. xv).

[48] See for example: F. Delcourt et al., 'Bibliotherapy and Schizophrenia: A Stanghellinian Perspective', *Psychopathology* 58:4 (2025) 236-246.

[49] F. Kafka, R. Winston & C. Winston (transl.), *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* (New York: Schocken, 1978), p. 10.

[50] Kafka, *The Diaries 1910-1923*, p. 222.

The Castle.[51] Whereas visual outsider artists with similar personality types (Henry Darger and Adolf Wölfli come to mind, for example) sought refuge in self-created worlds made up from images in a highly idiosyncratic visual language, Kafka can be seen as a literary outsider artist who created a private world using a highly personal literary style. He imparted his inner voices to novelistic characters such as K., using the metaphor of a castle to express his inner life in a literary manner. Through the phenomenological analysis presented, we hope to have used the key to the unfamiliar rooms of Kafka's self to gain more insight into the schizoid personality type.

[51] Kafka, *The Castle*, p. xv.