

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

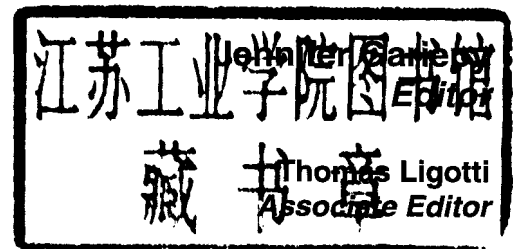
78

TOPICS VOLUME

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

**Excerpts from Criticism of Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**



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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-2137-4
ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series

For criticism on	Consult these Gale series
Authors now living or who died after December 31, 1959	<i>CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM (CLC)</i>
Authors who died between 1900 and 1959	<i>TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY CRITICISM (TCLC)</i>
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Authors who died before 1400	<i>CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL LITERATURE CRITICISM (CMLC)</i>
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Poets	<i>POETRY CRITICISM (PC)</i>
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Black writers of the past two hundred years	<i>BLACK LITERATURE CRITICISM (BLC)</i>
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Native North American writers and orators of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries	<i>NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE (NNAL)</i>
Major authors from the Renaissance to the present	<i>WORLD LITERATURE CRITICISM, 1500 TO THE PRESENT (WLC)</i>

Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and excerpting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topic entries widen the focus of the series from individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 6-12 authors or 3-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, excerpts of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **Author Heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at

the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References to past volumes of *TCLC* are provided at the beginning of the introduction. Additional sources of information in other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*, are listed in a box at the end of the entry.
- Some *TCLC* entries include **Portraits** of the author. Entries also may contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Critical excerpts are prefaced by **Annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the excerpt, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference excerpts by critics who discuss each other's commentary.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Criticism is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the excerpts in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- An annotated list of **Further Reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.

- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **Nationality Index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.
- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC*, *TCLC*, *LC 1400-1800*, and the *CLC* yearbook.
- Each new volume of *TCLC*, with the exception of the Topics volumes, includes a **Title Index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *TCLC* title index. This annual cumulation lists all titles discussed in the series since its inception and is issued with the first volume of *TCLC* published each year. Additional copies of the index are available on request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included *TCLC* cumulative index.

Citing Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to materials drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

¹William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, (AMS Press, 1987); excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 94-105.

²George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review*, 6 (Winter 1949), pp. 85-92; excerpted and reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 40-3.

Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to excerpted criticism, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Death in Literature	1
Introduction	1
Representative Works	1
Fiction	2
Poetry	115
Drama	146
Further Reading	181
 Drugs and Literature	184
Introduction	184
Representative Works	184
Overviews	185
Pre-Twentieth-Century Literature	201
Twentieth-Century Literature	242
Further Reading	282
 Television and Literature	283
Introduction	283
Representative Works	283
Television and Literacy	283
Reading vs. Watching	298
Adaptations	341
Literary Genres and Television	362
Television Genres and Literature	390
Children's Literature/Children's Television	410
Further Reading	425

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 429

Literary Criticism Series Topic Index 496

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 505

Death in Literature

INTRODUCTION

Among the most frequently treated subjects in literature, death—present as a theme, symbol, or plot device—exists as one of the defining elements in the writing of modern poets, dramatists, and novelists. Intertwined with the origins of literature itself, human consciousness of mortality has for centuries provided the impetus for reflection on the causes, meaning, and nature of existence. And, while treatments of death are as varied as the authors who write them, scholars have perceived in modern texts—whether for the stage, in verse, or in prose fiction—certain clearly defined approaches to this topic of nearly universal interest.

Modern writers have frequently presented death as the ultimate existential dilemma, one which arouses terrible anxiety as it offers an avenue toward authentic self-discovery. Likewise, death is often perceived within a larger context, as part of the natural cycle of decay and renewal, or treated as a source of laughter, co-opted for humorous ends by writers of black comedy and absurdist drama, who nonetheless recognize the high seriousness of their subject. Death in literature also carries with it a range of symbolic implications, over the years having been aligned with ideas of retreat into solipsism, escape, alienation, and ultimately with the sources of meaning and the creation of literature itself.

In the modern novel and short story death has achieved a nearly ubiquitous presence. Critics observe in the works of Franz Kafka and D. H. Lawrence, for example, an almost obsessive concern with human mortality, which produces states of alienation, anxiety, and a potential retreat into the self in order to escape the omnipresent forces of death and decay. Death in the works of the Modernists is also frequently associated with solipsistic individuals, in relation to whom external and internal forces collude, symbolically cutting them away from humanity. Scholars acknowledge that the intense study of death undertaken by many Modernists also affords some writers the opportunity to more fully understand life and living. For writers like Gertrude Stein and Italo Svevo—in his *Confessions of Zeno* (1923)—the contemplation of human mortality leads to an understanding of personal identity and provides for an immanent meaning in life. Writers of the contemporary era have also often focused on the comic qualities of death under the umbrella of “black humor” fiction. Using the pretext of death as an inescapable part of the human comedy, such writers as J. P. Donleavy in *The Ginger Man* (1955), Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. in *Slaughter-house Five*, (1969) and Vladimir

Nabokov in *Pale Fire* (1962)—to name only a few—have used the subject of death as an ironic metaphor for life and art in the twentieth century. In the writings of these and other contemporary authors, death pervades the story and its protagonists’ minds, and offers an absurd commentary on the brevity and meaninglessness of their lives and the finality of their deaths.

The symptoms of black humor fiction stretch beyond genre boundaries to the field of drama, in which the writers of modern tragicomedy and proponents of the theater of the absurd—represented by such writers as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter—again study the humorous side of death. Critics have seen a wide diversity, nonetheless, in the writings of these dramatists. These range from Beckett, whose fatalism in the face of incomprehensibility demonstrates that laughter might be the only appropriate response to a violent and hopelessly absurd universe, to Ionesco, in whose tragicomic plays about death critics discern an affirmation of life. Other playwrights, including Eugene O’Neill and Tennessee Williams, have dealt with death as the defining feature of stage tragedy. Critic Philip M. Armato has characterized Williams’s mid-career plays, among them *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), as “one poet’s quest for a solution to the problems created by man’s awareness of the inevitability of death.” Elsewhere, Robert Feldman has seen in the characters of O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) a longing for death as an escape from the seemingly interminable pain of life.

Such tragic responses to death are more in line with the serious mood that tends to prevail in poetry on the subject. Critics find this attitude best exemplified in the musings of the twentieth century confessional poets, a group that includes such writers as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. For several of these writers, notably Plath and Sexton, death as a pretext for understanding life is of tantamount importance. In the poetry of these introspective writers, mortality exists as the defining sensibility, and is deeply rooted in a personal experience of the anguish of living and of death; an experience so intense for Plath and Sexton as to have culminated in their own suicides.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Sherwood Anderson
 Winesburg, Ohio (short stories) 1919
John Barth
 The Floating Opera (novel) 1956

- Samuel Beckett
Happy Days (drama) 1961
- Saul Bellow
Mr. Sammler's Planet (novel) 1970
- John Berryman
77 Dream Songs (poetry) 1964
- Richard Brautigan
The Abortion (novel) 1971
- Hermann Broch
Der Tod des Vergil [The Death of Vergil] (novel) 1945
- Albert Camus
La peste [The Plague] (novel) 1947
- Willa Cather
Death Comes for the Archbishop (novel) 1927
- E. E. Cummings
Santa Claus—A Morality (drama) 1946
- J. P. Donleavy
The Ginger Man (novel) 1955
- Ernest Dowson
 "The Dying of Francis Donne" (short story) 1896
- Friedrich Dürrenmatt
Der Meteor [The Meteor] (drama) 1966
- William Faulkner
As I Lay Dying (novel) 1930
- John Hawkes
Second Skin (novel) 1964
- Joseph Heller
Catch-22 (novel) 1961
- Ernest Hemingway
A Farewell to Arms (novel) 1929
- Henrik Ibsen
Når vi døde vågner [When We Dead Awaken] (drama) 1906
- Eugène Ionesco
Tueur sans gages [The Killer] (drama) 1959
Le roi se meurt [Exit the King] (drama) 1963
- Henry James
 "The Turn of the Screw" (novella) 1898
The Wings of the Dove (novel) 1902
- James Joyce
Dubliners (short stories) 1914
- Franz Kafka
Der Prozess [The Trial] (novel) 1925
- D. H. Lawrence
The Man Who Died (novel) 1931
- Robert Lowell
Life Studies (poetry) 1959
- Thomas Mann
Der Tod in Venedig [Death in Venice] (novel) 1913
Der Zauberberg [The Magic Mountain] (novel) 1924
- Vladimir Nabokov
Pale Fire (novel) 1962
- Eugene O'Neill
Mourning Becomes Electra (drama) 1931
- Walker Percy
The Last Gentleman (novel) 1966
- Harold Pinter
No Man's Land (drama) 1975
- Sylvia Plath
The Collected Poems (poetry) 1981
- Thomas Pynchon
Gravity's Rainbow (novel) 1973
- Rainer Maria Rilke
Duineser Elegien [Duino Elegies] (poetry) 1923
- Anne Sexton
Live or Die (poetry) 1966
- Wallace Stevens
The Auroras of Autumn (poetry) 1950
- Italo Svevo
Confessions of Zeno (novel) 1923
- Leo Tolstoy
Smert Ivana Ilyicha [The Death of Ivan Ilych] (novel) 1886
- Mark Twain
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (novel) 1885
- John Updike
The Centaur (novel) 1963
- Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
Slaughterhouse-Five (novel) 1969
- Tennessee Williams
Suddenly Last Summer (drama) 1958
The Night of the Iguana (drama) 1961

FICTION

Charles Bernheimer

SOURCE: "On Death and Dying: Kafka's Allegory of Reading," in *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance: Centenary Readings*, edited by Alan Udoff, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 87-96.

[In the following essay, Bernheimer studies Franz Kafka's literary-existential exploration of the subject of death.]

My title alludes to two very different books, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's compassionate account of the feelings of terminally ill patients and Paul de Man's rigorous study of the self-destructiveness of literary texts.¹ This double allusion is intended to suggest the scope of Kafka's conception of death, which ranges from naturalistic reference to the writer's approaching end to near suspension of reference in the allegorical figuration of his writing destiny. A close analysis of two famous passages, frequently conflated by critics, will demonstrate how Kafka's different attitudes to death and dying are inscribed in his fiction as implied models for its reading.

The first passage is a diary entry written on December 13, 1914:

Recently at Felix's. On the way home told Max that I shall lie very contentedly on my deathbed, provided the pain isn't too great. I forgot—and later purposely omitted—to add that the best things I have written have their basis in this capacity of

mine to meet death with contentment. All these fine and very convincing passages always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this, or at least he should be. But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose that he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case with a real lament, but dies beautifully and purely away. It is the same thing as my perpetual lamenting to my mother over pains that were not nearly so great as my laments would lead one to believe. With my mother, of course, I did not need to make so great a display of art as with the reader. (D II, 102; T, 448-49)²

What strikes one immediately about this meditation is that Kafka, who usually experiences himself as weak, indecisive, and anxiety-ridden, here attributes mastery to himself, mastery indeed of that most extreme of human eventualities, his own death. And this remarkable assurance in the face of death he sees as the basis for a second kind of mastery, a control of the writing process so fine that he can create a text that is "möglichst vollkommen," as perfect, complete, entire as possible, "schön und rein," beautiful and pure.³

There is no doubt a certain cruelty in the game Kafka describes. Himself immune to the fear of death, he detaches himself from his reader in order to facilitate that reader's identification with the protagonist's feelings of loss, injustice, and confusion. Whereas the reader is convinced by the mimetic power of the literary work of the implacable finality of death, the writer rejoices in his ability to construct that finality as a textual effect. The death with which the writer identifies—"Ich freue mich ja in dem Sterbenden zu sterben"—is a fiction produced "with clear understanding" of its fictionality. The ground of that understanding, Kafka insists, is not literary; it is experiential. First the writer must be able to face his own death cheerfully, then he may write that death as part of a fictional game free of existential relevance.

The game of literature thus has a center that originates its freeplay while it stands outside that freeplay, to borrow terms from Derrida's critique of metaphysical structure. Kafka's concluding reference to his childhood lamentation to his mother suggests a psychoanalytic reading of this generative center. For the mother is the original source of contentment and frustration, the original ground in symbolic relation to which a game of mastery may be played—witness the famous *fort-da* game of Freud's grandson. The young Kafka's lamentation in deceitful excess of any felt pain prefigures his later artful deception of his reader. Both fictional elaborations are based on a fundamental confidence in existential reality, in life's biological origin in the first case, in its biological

end in the second. One might even speculate, given the associational logic of the passage, that the contentment Kafka believes he will feel on his deathbed is due in part to his fantasizing death as a return to the mother, a speculation that can be supported, as I have shown elsewhere, by an analysis of the letters to Felice and to Milena, in which Kafka expresses a regressive yearning to dissolve into these maternal presences.⁴

But if it is indeed this hidden fantasy scenario that sustains Kafka's confidence in the face of death, then matters are not quite as they seemed in our initial analysis. What appeared to be an experimental grounding for fictional freeplay may actually be a fantasy motivated by a wish to deny experience. This point of view would suggest that Kafka thinks himself able to die contentedly not because he has mastered the reality of his own death but because he has, in fantasy, never lived, never been born. "My life is a hesitation before birth" (D II, 210; T, 561), he noted in 1922. If his life has itself been a fiction, a duplicitous mirage, if he has been "dead . . . in his own lifetime" (D II, 196; T, 545), then the writing game in which he lives through his own death is not secondary to but rather a mirror image of the existential game in which he dies through his own life. The grounding in experience has been lost: fictional death mirrors fictional life. Kafka has not mastered his actual death: he has made the distinction between life and death into a literary game.

It now appears that Kafka may be deceiving himself in this passage and that his understanding may not really be much clearer than that of the reader he thinks he is tricking. He describes the freedom of writing as dependent on the writer's freedom from the terror of death. The literary work can achieve completion, he maintains, only if the artist can place himself imaginatively at the end of his life and not "suddenly break off" his writing as a result of this imagined placement *in extremis*. The beauty and purity of the work are thus qualities that reflect, and are grounded in, the wholeness of a biological life that will pass away without resistance. Not surprisingly, this view of a contented death corresponds to Kafka's most positive account of a happy birth—that of "The Judgment," written in one long night of inspired creativity. "The story came out of me," he observed, "like a real birth. . . . Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul" (D I, 278, 276; T, 296, 294). No breaking off here: the lament "verläuff schön und rein." Such a relation to writing, in which the text is born and dies as the biological extension of the author's being and achieves its coherence, its "Vollkommenheit," as what Kafka elsewhere calls "a blood relation" (D I, 134; T, 142) of its creator, this fantasized relation to writing that binds the freeplay of fiction to a maternal origin and makes it readable as what Barthes calls a "text of pleasure" was the focus of Kafka's literary ambition throughout the first period of his creative activity.

But in this same period Kafka was coming to realize with ever greater lucidity that to conceive himself as origin

and ground of his writing, as existing outside its fictionalizing game, was a wish-fulfilling delusion. I have suggested that a trace of the repression of this awareness is perceptible in the implied circularity of the associational logic in Kafka's reflection: he can imagine himself dying contentedly because this ending will be a return to his beginning. This circular fantasy cancels the temporal sequentiality of experience while it maintains the biological determinants of that sequence: maternal origin and physical death. The fantasy thus appears to have a primarily psychological genesis and to reflect a regressively narcissistic impulse. Kafka's sense of having mastered death is fostered by his repression of this regressive motivation. The attraction of this illusion of mastery may also account for his inability in this diary entry to move from an analysis founded in subjective psychology to one that perceives writing as the undoing of such a psychology and of its biological determinants.

Numerous passages in the diaries and letters to Felice, written in the period from 1912 to 1916, suggest that he was arriving at such a negative perception of his scriptive destiny even while he continued to assert writing's affirmative, mimetic potential. In these passages Kafka identifies his life entirely with writing. He comes into being, he declares, not at the point of his biological birth but at the moment of his body's being possessed by writing, as by a devil. "I have no literary interests," he tells Felice in 1913, "but am made of literature. I am nothing else, and cannot be anything else" (LF, 304; BF, 444). And what does this identification with writing entail? "It is not death, alas," says Kafka, "but the eternal torments of dying" (D II, 77; T, 420). Death in this sense belongs to life, whether it be approached with contentment or with lamentation. Dying, in contrast, suspends, or defers, the possibility of death—it is, in the phrase from Hegel that Maurice Blanchot makes the focus of his extraordinary article "Literature and the Right to Death," "that life which supports death and maintains itself in it," death in the process of becoming.⁵

The writer sustains death, maintains himself within it, by attempting to free language from any ground outside its own negativity. The writer never rejoices in his own death because he is always-already immersed in a process that removes him from life and offers him death as a "merciful surplus of strength" (D II, 184; T, 531). There can be no question of mastery here: the writer, made of literature, gives himself to an incessant activity of self-distancing, self-fictionalizing, to a game that suspends indefinitely the difference between life and death.

It is this state of suspended animation that Kafka describes with disturbing vividness in his letter to Max Brod of July 5, 1922. The context is an explanation of Kafka's fearful resistance to going on a trip to visit his friend Oskar Baum in the Georgental:

Last night as I lay sleepless and let everything continually veer back and forth between my aching temples what I had almost forgotten during the

last relatively quiet time became clear to me: namely, on what frail ground or rather altogether nonexistent ground I live, over a darkness from which the dark power emerges when it wills and, heedless of my stammering, destroys my life. Writing sustains me, but is it not more accurate to say that it sustains this kind of life? By this I don't mean, of course, that my life is better when I don't write. Rather it is much worse then and wholly unbearable and has to end in madness. But that, granted, only follows from the postulate that I am a writer, which is actually true even when I am not writing, and a nonwriting writer is a monster inviting madness. But what about being a writer itself? Writing is a sweet and wonderful reward, but for what? In the night it became clear to me, as clear as a child's lesson book, that it is the reward for serving the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unshackling of spirits bound by nature, these dubious embraces and whatever else may take place in the nether parts which the higher parts no longer know, when one writes one's stories in the sunshine. Perhaps there are other forms of writing, but I know only this kind; at night, when fear keeps me from sleeping, I know only this kind. And the diabolic element in it seems very clear to me. It is vanity and sensuality which continually buzz about one's own or even another's form—and feast on him. The movement multiplies itself—it is a regular solar system of vanity. Sometimes a naive person will wish, "I would like to be dead and see how everyone mourns me." Such a writer is continually staging such a scene: He dies (or rather he does not live) and continually mourns himself. From this springs a terrible fear of death, which need not reveal itself as fear of death but may also appear as fear of change, as fear of Georgental. The reasons for this fear of death may be divided into two main categories. First he has a terrible fear of dying because he has not yet lived. By this I do not mean that wife and child, fields and cattle are essential to living. What is essential to life is only to forgo complacency, to move into the house instead of admiring it and hanging garlands around it. In reply to this, one might say that this is a matter of fate and is not given into anyone's hand. But then why this sense of repining, this repining that never ceases? To make oneself finer and more savory? That is a part of it. But why do such nights leave one always with the refrain: I could live and I do not live. The second reason—perhaps it is all really one, the two do not want to stay apart for me now—is the belief: "What I have playacted is really going to happen. I have not bought myself off by my writing. I died my whole life long and now I will really die. My life was sweeter than other peoples' and my death will be more terrible by the same degree. Of course the writer in me will die right away, since such a figure has no base, no substance, is less than dust. He is only barely possible in the broil of earthly life, is only a construct of sensuality. That is your writer for you. But I myself cannot go on living because I have not lived, I have remained clay, I have not blown the spark into fire, but only used it to light up my corpse." It will be a strange burial: the writer, insubstantial

as he is, consigning the old corpse, the longtime corpse, to the grave. I am enough of a writer to appreciate the scene with all my senses, or—and it is the same thing—to want to describe it, with total self-forgetfulness—not alertness, but self-forgetfulness is the writer's first prerequisite. (L, 333-34; Br, 384-85)

Here the writer's loss of any experiential ground, of any basis in duration, of any life outside his ongoing death, is seen as constitutive of his being-as-literature. Writing sustains his life, but that life involves a cannibalistic depletion of his biological existence. It is a diabolic reward for having denied life's sheltering happiness and its offer of a final and satisfying death. To write is to enter the darkness of unknowing, where language becomes a buzz of words that expresses no self but rather perpetuates its erosion, its continual, never-ending loss.

The contrast with the earlier passage we analyzed is striking. The writer who had pictured himself confronting death with contentment now has "a terrible fear of death." And this fear is related to precisely the same fictional staging of his own death that had previously given Kafka a reassuring sense of mastery. Now that mastery is considered vanity, the vanity of a self-enclosed linguistic system that can only metaphorically be considered a "Sonnensystem" (sunlight, Kafka declares earlier in the letter, would erase the writing he generates in the dark, nether regions). This is a solar system in which the sun is missing, outside itself, elsewhere. No longer is the activity of writing grounded in the experiential reality where Kafka had anchored it in his reflection of 1914. Then the writer was sustained in his fictionalizing activity by his memory of his non-fictional self's confidence that death need not be feared. Now that non-fictional self, "mein wirkliches Ich," is considered never to have lived, to have been a corpse all along. The writer's precarious existence is sustained by his ability to forget this dead self. But this forgetting can never be total. "Everything is allowed him, except self-oblivion," Kafka wrote in one of the aphorisms of the "He" series, "wherewith, however, everything in turn is denied him, except the one thing necessary at the moment for the whole" (GW, 158; B, 285). What remains of this denial is a trace that may be understood psychologically as a "sense of repining," the writer's regret for an ego that has never moved into its own house, or that may be understood reflexively as literature's mournful awareness that it can never "die beautifully and purely away" but must continue ceaselessly to feed sensually off of life.

Kafka's fear of death may be understood as a fear of this trace's being conclusively erased, causing a fusion of corpse-like self and insubstantial writer. Such a fusion did at times appear desirable to Kafka as the achievement of self-oblivion and hence of wholeness. "After all," he wrote to Felice, "there can be no more beautiful spot to die in, no spot more worthy of total despair, than one's own novel" (LF, 142; BF, 231). Despair fosters the happy fantasy of an inscription that coincides with being by symbolizing its end. Kafka's novel here plays the role of his mother in the earlier passage. In fantasy, the novel

receives his despair as generously as his mother had received his laments. In contrast, the writer who fears his own death does not despair. He suffers, and suffering, Kafka wrote in a notebook, "is the only positive element in this world, indeed it is the only link between this world and the positive" (DF, 90; H, 108). Unreadable in itself, suffering stimulates the ongoing process of self-reading of which the Georgental letter is but one remarkable residue. Actually this residue, as Stanley Corngold has pointed out, is a kind of excess or surplus, produced in the midst of the self's suffering as an inexhaustible question about the mode of that production.⁶ What is the difference, the text asks, between "I, myself" and "he, the writer?" Each is alive only insofar as the other is dead, and vice versa—"the two do not want to stay apart for me now," comments Kafka. It seems as if each could be read as a figure for the other, as if each were capable of functioning as either tenor or vehicle and "veer[ed] back and forth between [Kafka's] aching temples." Only the fundamental reference to physical suffering remains stable.

How can the analysis we have performed of these two passages linking writing and death help in the task of interpreting Kafka's fiction? First of all, it should alert us to the very different meanings that death can have for Kafka and to the contrasting conceptions of writing he associated with each. Thus if Kafka's prose is, as Roman Karst has observed, "a contemplation of dying—a poetic eschatology," the critic should beware of adding, as Karst does, "Everything in it is the desire for and expectation of the end—of that which the ultimate moment brings."⁷ Such a desire for death translates in literary terms into a desire for wholeness, "Vollkommenheit," the finality of an ending that closes itself off from the incessant murmur of writing. It is a desire for death to be clearly definable as the absence of life and for writing to be free to elaborate its fictional inventions on the basis of their analogy to life's limited organic form and constricted temporal extension. Kafka no doubt felt this desire intensely, and it could be shown that it motivates not only many of his protagonists but also many of his critics. The critics who interpret Kafka in these terms implicitly allege not to be taken in by the secret game whereby he pretends, in the diary entry of 1914, to be duping his readers' understanding. But their claim to hermeneutic mastery is no more than a repetition of Kafka's own similar claim: they are grounding the literary game in lived experience and reassuring themselves thereby of death's reality outside linguistic freeplay. In this they resemble the family man in Kafka's story who finds nothing more worrisome about the mobile spool of tangled thread that calls itself Odradek and occasionally inhabits his house than the thought that Odradek may be unable to die and will most likely outlive him. Odradek, a word, the narrator tells us, of uncertain etymology, is also a being of uncertain ontology. A laughing figure ("Gebilde") for the enduring instability of the figural, he/it renders unreadable the distinction between life and death, creature and thing.

Walter Benjamin's observation that "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering

life with a death he reads about" applies to Kafka's protagonists.⁸ They are most often readers of this kind, with the peculiar twist that the story with which they hope to warm their shivering lives is their own—the engagement story Georg Bendemann writes to his friend in Russia, the tale of dutiful work performance whereby Gregor Samsa attempts to justify himself to the chief clerk, the narrative of innocence Joseph K. futilely presents at his interrogation, the account of his being hired as Landsurveyor with which K. wishes to confront the Castle. In a sense, all these would-be stories are analogous to Kafka's claim that he is capable of meeting his death with contentment. Their goal is to narrativize a life in such a way that the present moment appears as its end and completion. Indeed, in "The Hunter Gracchus," the story that illustrates more explicitly than any other the issues I have been exploring, the hunter declares: "I had been glad to live and I was glad to die" (CS, 229; SE, 228).

But the hunter's death ship has taken a wrong turn and now, neither dead nor alive, the "fundamental error of [his] onetime death" ("der Grundfehler [seines] einstmaligen Sterbens") (CS, 229; SE, 287), mocks him forever. What has been lost, precisely, is the ground on which an individual's death can occur only once, the ground that justifies the narrative completion of his life. The hunter, like the other Kafka protagonists I mentioned, has lost himself in a space of fundamental error, of perpetual errancy. Like Odradek, who is "extraordinarily nimble and can never be laid hold of" (CS, 428; SE, 139), Gracchus is never more than provisionally and delusively present in any world. He has become an unreadable text, a floating signifier: "Nobody will read what I write here" (CS, 230; my translation; SE, 288), he declares in a surprisingly undisguised identification of his suspended existence with the writing process and a disturbing denial of what I as reader am presently engaged in doing.

A certain mode of psychoanalytic interpretation offers a way of reading this denial. Kafka, whose name is etymologically related to Gracchus, may be fantasizing a way out of the writer's predicament as illustrated by Gracchus's perpetual errancy: if his text is not read, if it is not put into motion through any reader's help, then Kafka can imagine it as a grave that will not be opened, as a death ship that will not be led astray. "Nobody knows of me" (CS, 230; SE, 288), says Gracchus, reminding us of Kafka's lifelong reluctance to publish and of his request, when faced with his own death, that Brod burn all his unpublished manuscripts, as if in a great funeral pyre. Thus we are brought back, via this biographical circuit, to the writer's narcissistic dream of a contented death and to his fantasy of dying inside his own texts. The denial of the reader now appears as a strategy to counter the diabolic activity of the writer, dramatized in the narrative as fundamental error. Error supports death and maintains itself in it. Thus conceived, error corresponds in psychoanalytic terms to the fundamental drive energizing all unconscious activity, the

death instinct. Gracchus seems to embody that instinct in its close relationship to the scriptive process. Constantly in motion, hovering between life and death while hoping for death's finality, Gracchus errs in much the same sense that the unconscious does. To refuse the effort to read the unreadable text of his errancy would thus be tantamount to denying the unconscious function of writing. And this, according to one psychoanalytic interpretation, may well have been Kafka's unconscious desire.

Psychoanalysis thus transforms the unreadable text into a readable one. It is essentially a hermeneutics, wherein meaning and understanding, however complex, qualified and mediated, are ultimately based in an extralinguistic truth.⁹ If we can speak of the text as having an unconscious, we do so by analogy with the human psyche. "Psychology," Kafka wrote in one of his notebooks, "is the description of the reflection [Spiegelung] of the earthly world in the heavenly plane or, more correctly, the description of a reflection such as we, nurslings of the earth, imagine it, for no reflection actually occurs, we only see earth wherever we may turn" (H, 72; DF, 65-66). In these terms, Kafka's narratives become a kind of psychomachia: the protagonist wishes to tell a story of mastery, as if from the point of view of his death, of his reflection in the heavenly plane, and he battles against the erasure of this reflection, an erasure that represents the death drive within him. He wants to reach the imaginative space of his own death and thereby achieve the authority to narrate his life, but he is repulsed by the, to him, unimaginable activity of his own death impulse.

But there is perhaps a step beyond the circle of hermeneutic recuperation that Kafka's texts challenge their interpreters to take: this is what I call the step into allegory. Its epigraphs (or perhaps I should say epitaphs) could be Kafka's notebook observations, "The evolution of mankind—a growth of death-force" and "Our salvation is death, but not this one" (DF, 101; H, 123). The allegorical world is historical, it is in evolution, but, as Walter Benjamin observes in his brilliant discussion of allegory, "in this form history does not strike one as the process of eternal life so much as the advance of unending decay. . . . Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things."¹⁰ In the allegorical world, death can never offer salvation because the very notion of salvation betrays the ongoing temporal erosion, the continual growth of death-force, that characterizes the ruinous allegorical landscape. This is a "Sonnensystem" from which the life-giving sun is absent; that sun is the center of a universe of truth of which the mournful allegorical world has no part.

The existence of the writer as Kafka describes it to Brod in the letter of 1922 is purely allegorical in Benjamin's sense. The corpse Kafka claims to have been his whole life long is the allegorical emblem *par excellence*. "The allegorization of the physis," comments Benjamin, "can only be carried through vigorously in respect to the corpse."¹¹ "I" has been a corpse his whole life long, Kafka tells us. One way of understanding this observation