Oedipus and Joseph K.

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Abstract We could be forgiven for asking why Joseph K. was one of those modern heroes who took root, to the point of us identifying with him. We see our own fate in his, our own life's "trial". This same question however applies equally well to Hamlet and Oedipus. These, too, are our "alter egos"; the latter in particular still stands for "the most versatile work of world literature" (Lesky 48). This work not only influenced Shakespeare but no doubt others as well. We shall argue that Franz Kafka was one of those. Philosophical questions about guilt and punishment, liberty, decision making, agency and death have the same weight in Kafka as they do in Sophocles. The similarities between the two are astounding, even though it might be difficult to perceive them at first sight according to Dönt. A comparison of the two texts is therefore bound to open up new layers of understanding of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles.
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1

Soon after his arrest, Joseph K. gets into conversation with Frau Grubach, his landlady; she is most insistent in her advice that he should not take the unfortunate event too seriously. "You are indeed under arrest, but not like a thief is under arrest. When a man is arrested like a thief, then it's bad, but this arrest - it seems to me like something scholarly, forgive me if I'm saying something stupid, it seems to me like something scholarly which I don't understand, but which one doesn't have to understand either" (Kafka 15). The scene resembles the key conversation between Jocasta and Oedipus, moments before Jocasta's suicide. The Theban queen has undergone the discovery or anagnorisis before Oedipus; as the prophecy was coming true, she was able to piece together minute details from the past of Oedipus. This rational, decidedly masculine drawing of conclusions did not however divert from her feminine essence; concerned with preserving life, she entreated Oedipus, now no longer only her husband but also her son: "Oh, as thou carest for thy life, give o'er/This quest. Enough the anguish I endure" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1056)[1].

Jocasta's point was that in life, not everything needed to be explained and untangled, as nothing good can come of it. A similar point of view is adopted by K.'s landlady, Frau Grubach, who is also of the opinion that not everything needs to be under-

stood. The advocate's housemaid Leni, too, cautions K. in an accommodating fashion that he is too unforgiving as far as the court is concerned, "you can't defend yourself against this court" (Kafka 85). However, neither Oedipus nor Joseph K. follow this feminine advice and will not be persuaded; on the contrary, with all the might of their reason, they insist on casting light on the whole of their past and, that way, make clear their complicated present.

Apart from his landlady, Frau Gruber, already mentioned above as being on K.'s side, Fräulein Bürstner, his next door neighbour, was also very important. She was the first one K. told the details about his arrest and then his hearing. He suddenly seized her, "kissed her on the mouth and then all over her face like a thirsty animal who scours with his tongue the surface of a spring he has found at last. Finally, he kissed her on the neck, on her throat, and lingered there with his lips" (23). All that left K. satisfied with his behaviour; he was "surprised he was not even more satisfied" (24). He thought a talk with her essential and waited for her late into the night, as if suspecting it would be her who showed him the way on his last journey, pointing him to anagnorisis, just as Oedipus would finally be able to shed both his inborn and his subjective hamartia on Kithairon.

K. had another important encounter with Fräulein Bürstner: she will be the person to show the executioners and K. the way through the night streets into the quarry. Up to that moment, K. was resisting the executioners, while now, his coming across his neighbour fills him with happiness; she is his last ray of courage before his death. K. was now choosing where to walk, following "the course the Fräulein was taking in front of them, not because he wanted to overtake her, not because he wanted to keep her in sight as long as possible, but only because he wanted to keep in mind the reproach she signified for him" (175). For K. these moments of last happiness were also moments of essential understanding, that his life was wasted precisely because he "always wanted to grab at life, and not with the best of intentions either" (176). It was precisely the meeting with the Fräulein that enabled him, once and for all, "to say what has to be said to myself" (176).

At this realisation, "the Fräulein had turned off into a side street, but K. could do without her now" (176). The woman acquitted herself of her feminine role in K.'s last moments: she carefully guided him and ensured that he stayed on the path to knowledge, so that he should not, in this decisive moment, "want it to begin again" (176). Not to succumb again to his subjective hamartia which he had only just got rid of when he renounced his rebellion. He had to die alone, as the knowledge he had just reached was any moment to be followed by blindness, his eyes will extinguish, just as, immediately following his knowing, Oedipus extinguished his own eyes. An astounding similarity, not easily discernible, even though it works every time.

2

Two more important encounters have to be mentioned, that with the painter Titorelli and later, that with the priest at the cathedral.

Joseph K. went looking for Titorelli after it was levelled at him that he does not

do enough for his cause. The painter of such artistic name "knows a lot of judges and even if he himself may not have much influence", he could advise K. "how to get in touch with various influential people" (107).

What is most important for the understanding of Kafka's novel is how Titorelli understands art and, more particularly, how he understands its key principles, such as the principle of artistic inspiration and the principle of imitation and the consequent principle of artistic reality. Titorelli is a painter utterly devoid of artistic élan; he paints by commission, by dictation, and only at times, according to his own imagination.

When it came to the manner of imitation, the painter took the sitters' wishes into account. They were mostly judges that he depicted "just as the great old judges were painted" (107). That was the reason why all the portrait renditions of the judges resembled one another, and the same went for landscapes that showed "not the slightest perceptible difference" (128). The images were therefore not similar to one another, they were "absolutely identical" (128), as were the three pictures of the "moorland scene" that Joseph K. was forced to buy from the painter in gratitude for the advice received.

The other side of the coin, where his works were full of a wilful kind of imitation, when Titorelli entirely gave himself over to imagination, it was difficult to ascertain the meaning of the pictures that were, at first sight, completely illegible and therefore incomprehensible. Thus, the painter's intervention was needed for the meaning to emerge. It was precisely because of his freed imagination that they contained an intangible image of the courts' pretences and injustice. Such was Titorelli's depiction of Justice that K. immediately and easily recognised it as such, due to its accepted iconography of bound eyes and scales. What was unusual is that it was not motionless as tradition demanded, but appeared to be rushing somewhere. Titorelli explained that this particularity was demanded by the patron; however, not even this cowardice was able to do away with the rush of the artist's free imagination. While talking, the artist continued working on the picture and under his fingers, guided by free imagination, the image changed so much "it was scarcely reminiscent of the goddess of Justice any more, nor of the goddess of Victory either; now it looked exactly like the goddess of Hunting" (115).

This reversal was not merely following the logic of the workings of the court, uncovering its hidden essence, but also a literary precedent Kafka was following, that of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In the first stasimon, following the famous dialogue between the prophet Teiresias and Oedipus, there is talk of the Delphic Oracle and the fleeing beast that cannot escape the pursuing "voice immortal". It may, at first sight, seem entirely fanciful that a complete précis of Kafka's novel may be found in this Choral response in *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. This is how it goes:

Who is he by voice immortal named from Pythia's rocky cell,
Doer of foul deeds of bloodshed, horrors that no tongue can tell?
A foot for flight he needs
Fleeter than storm-swift steeds,

For on his heels doth follow,
Armed with the lightnings of his Sire, Apollo.
Like sleuth-hounds too
The Fates pursue. (Sophocles Oedipus Rex 475)

In accordance with this sudden metamorphosis of the goddess of Justice into the goddess of Hunting, Titorelli was helping his 'clients' and thus also Joseph K. The painter's philosophy of law and his legal logic have achieved an incredible level of sophistication, so that his aid seemed to the client as easy as stepping from Justice to the goddess of Hunting and back again, while not a word is said about the goddess of Victory. As regards K. proclaiming his innocence, Titorelli has three suggestions, three possible acquittals: actual acquittal, apparent acquittal and playing for time. The painter had not read the rules; however, he was aware that they stipulated that an innocent man has to be acquitted. Yet, as in reality judges can be influenced, Titorelli had never heard of an actual acquittal. K.'s understandable comment that followed was that "the whole court could be replaced by one executioner" (Kafka 121). As therefore there was no chance of an actual acquittal, all K. was left with was apparent acquittal and playing for time. In apparent acquittal, the first release is followed by a new arrest, the second release by another arrest and so forth. "That's already contained in the concept of apparent acquittal" (125), Titorelli explained to K. In the playing for time as the third option, the proceedings are kept permanently at their first stages. In this case, "the proceedings don't come to a stop, but the defendant is almost as safeguarded against a conviction as he would be if he were free" (26). At the end, Titorelli summed up his argument as follows: "What both methods have in common is that they prevent conviction of the defendant." To which Joseph K. added: "But they also prevent actual acquittal" (127). This confirms the theory above, which is that the court can only move between two extreme positions, between justice and hunting; a thought confirmed by Titorelli's statement that "the case must be kept constantly moving in the small area to which it has been artificially restricted" (126).

And just as Oedipus reached "a truce to argument" after he had blinded himself, he was really only freed at Colonus. Such was also the case with Joseph K: after the arrest, there was "a truce to argument" and he was only finally freed at the quarry. Colonus and the quarry thus only act as the "highest court" where the goddess of Justice will finally come to rest and thus evict from herself both hunt and victory.

3

It seems that the decisive event before the final reversal is K.'s meeting with the priest at the cathedral. The scene is reminiscent of the famous meeting between Teiresias and Oedipus. This can initially be concluded by analysing the names of the two main protagonists, Oedipus and Joseph K., both obviously linked to their fates.

In the initial scene of *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, Teiresias and Oedipus come to verbal blows, that is a verbal war or logomachia, where Oedipus calls the prophet names, putting down his prophetic talents. In answer, Teiresias foretells the tragic

fate that awaits Oedipus; soon it will become clear that he is his children's brother and father, his mother's son and husband and his father's killer "all unwitting art a double foe /To thine own kin, the living and the dead" (Sophocles Oedipus Rex, 451). In his speech, the seer reveals to Oedipus the secret of his birth and death: "This day shall be thy birth-day, and thy grave" (483). As the Corinthian herdsman was later to point out, his name was connected with both: "Whence thou deriv'st the name that still is thine!" (1036)

The name of Oedipus is therefore linked to both his birth and his death; his name signifies 'the one with swollen legs', the one therefore who was to be sacrificed through being suspended from a tree by his ankles. This was an ancient manner of sacrificing a firstborn son, so that he should hang off a tree like a fruit, "which should benefit the fruit tree and all other vegetation that would bear more and better that season." (Pavlovič 186). As we know, this sacrifice was not brought to completion, it was interrupted, and the offering that was intended for the benefit of the vegetative cycle was taken down and transported to Corinth. The only reminder of the botched ritual were the pierced feet of Oedipus. And Oedipus will have to pay for this failure until his death at Kithairon, where he will re-enact the once unsuccessful ritual and, through it, leave this world.

The meeting between K. and the priest started in a completely empty church. The priest greeted K. with an inclination of the head. K. simultaneously crossed himself. The priest "gave himself a little swing to gain momentum and quickly climbed up the steps" (Kafka 162). Seers and prophets always assume an elevated position from which to deliver their oracles. Teiresias uses a wooden tower for this purpose, the tower that the angry Oedipus had demolished. Thus, the priest's prophetic words could also only be proffered from the pulpit. He had to establish a distance between himself and K., otherwise he could allow himself to be influenced and forget his job. And he had to maintain a certain ceremony of his being.

Just like Oedipus, K., too, attempted to ignore the prophetic word, in his case by leaving the church. "He had almost left the pew area and was approaching the open space between this and the entrance doors, when he heard the priest's voice for the first time. A powerful, practised voice. How it pierced the expectant cathedral! But it was not directed at a congregation. It was unambiguous and there was no escape; he was calling: 'Joseph K.!" (163)
This sudden summons kept K. for a while:

> For the time being he was still free, he could walk on and make his way from there through one of the three small dark wooden doors/.../ That would show he had not understood, or that he had indeed understood but was taking no notice. But if he turned round he was caught, for then he was admitting he understood very well, that he was really the person called for, and that he would comply. (163)

K. seemed to think this was some sort of a childish hide-and-seek, so he only just turned toward the pulpit, when the priest "beckoned him nearer with his finger"

(163). And, as guilt attracts courts, K. even broke into a run in order to reach the pulpit, where the priest checked his identity: "You are Joseph K.?", and, "You are accused", which Joseph confirmed by saying, "Yes". "Then you are the one I am seeking", said the priest. "I had you summoned to this place" (164).

This in turn confirmed Leni's suspicion. The housemaid let him know during a telephone conversation that his departure for the cathedral could have nothing to do with any tourism, guiding some random Italian through art-historical treasures, but quite simply with the fact that they are "hounding" K.. Joseph K. could not stand pity, so he hurriedly brought the conversation with Leni to an end, however, "as he replaced the receiver he said, half to himself and half to the distant girl whose voice he could no longer hear: 'Yes, they are hounding me'" (158). The priest's naming him therefore settled K.'s identity. Something that was extremely ambiguous if not impossible at the beginning of the novel has been clarified and confirmed, namely that it was Joseph K. and nobody else who was accused. A long process is needed, with the prison chaplain obviously part of it, which has now reached its apogee at the cathedral of all places. During the first hearing, K.'s identity is anything but clear, as the investigating magistrate initially thought Joseph K. to be "an interior decorator" (31).

The investigating magistrate was therefore unable to identify the accused. Perhaps he really did order an interior decorator to be apprehended, equally as innocent as Joseph K., but the warders chose Joseph K. and no one else. It was only the priest who managed to call him by his real name and know who he was addressing-the one whose name, just as was the case with Oedipus, was linked to his fate. It was by now clear, and the priest made a special point of it, that the court found K. guilty and that it held his guilt to be proven. Joseph assured the priest that he was not guilty, as a person cannot be guilty, for "we are all human beings here after all." "'That is right,' said the priest, 'but everyone guilty always talks like that'" (164). — the exact way in which Teiresias parried Oedipus.

With this, the priest acquitted himself of his prophetic business and could allow himself to descend from the heights to the church nave. It seems though that the priest did not possess the omniscience of Teiresias, even though he preached from on high. He did not know how the trial would end; he feared it would end badly.

Even though K. had the impression that the priest's grandeur was in no way diminished seen from close too, he was nevertheless overwhelmed with a sense of infinite trust in him and was willing to talk quite openly. That was however not in accordance with the office of the priest as judicial chaplain, who tried to point out K.'s naivety with regard to the court, as well as vis-à-vis himself as a court official. It was all part of a ruse, a constituent part of the court and its essence, something that could be checked in the annals of the Law.

This brings us face to face with one of the problems in *The Trial* that is so closely linked to *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. It is the widely-known parable about the Law. The doorkeeper before the Law takes the place of the Sphinx, the door to the Law is the gates to Thebes and the man wishing to enter is both Oedipus and Joseph K. Oedipus entered Thebes as a supposedly free man; the fate of the Sphinx was linked to the

gates of Thebes. By entering the city where he was driven ("hounded") by the prophecy, he decided his tragic fate. Having solved the riddle, Oedipus opened the gates into Thebes. He was the first stranger to have managed the feat. And he managed because he was fleeing the prophecy about himself; guilt always attracts the court, therefore the Sphinx had to plummet and the gates had to open. Thebes however transformed from a safe into an unsafe place after the fall of the Sphinx. Inside Thebes, Oedipus encountered plague, decay, demise of all living things. By solving the riddle, Oedipus himself became a riddle. He was now inside the fortifications and until he found the killer of old Laïus, he didn't stand a chance of salvation. Did the Sphinx therefore deceive Oedipus, who was only able to learn the truth about himself when there was no possible escape either for himself, or for those close to him? Were the Theban gates for him alone and slammed shut once he finally entered? Did the Sphinx take fright at the anthropocentric answer of Oedipus to her riddle and thus thrust into oblivion her own, anachronistically conceived cosmocentric riddle? "As a man, who took the part of history against things ritual and mythological, Oedipus answered the riddle historically. The Sphinx expected a ritual solution to the riddle, based on the foundations of death and life, as apparent periods of transition between youth, maturity and old age. What she got instead was the banal answer of a pragmatic man of history who will any moment now place himself at the centre of the universe. Oedipus knew no other answer. /. . . /The three ages are no longer to do with vegetative growth/. . . / but the three ages of man, to be ousted only by death. (Vrčko, *Epic and Tragedy* 423). Just as Oedipus was hoping for a fault in the prophecy, so he misunderstood the riddle of the Sphinx.

Joseph K. tried to solve the riddle of his abduction and yet at the very beginning, as soon as he crossed the threshold of the court, a woman said: "After you, I must shut this door. Nobody else may go in" (Kafka 30). And some time later, when the information officer tried to get him out of the court, he realized that K. wanted to go to start with, "then you can tell him a hundred times this is the way out and he doesn't move" (57). Such details indicate how caught K. is. It seems that the parable of the man before the Law is for him more appropriate than his own confinement at the court. K. can no longer enter the Law; in the end, he gives up trying, betrayed by his body. All he can do is haplessly to realise that the door was meant for him all along and that he will never know what hides behind it. Unless, that is, K. did not open the doors with his journey to the quarry, the ultimate doors reserved only for him to step through. He will however never know whether his sacrifice was successful in clearing away all the filth that had accumulated around him. He came to some important conclusions just regarding himself; his death was his alone.

Oedipus, too, fled before the oracle, even though it was always "open" to him, as one cannot doubt the validity of oracles. Unlike K., Oedipus was able to go through the doors at Kithairon, open for him since the beginning: "My tomb predestined for me by my sire and mother" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1451).

All the while, Oedipus was able to look back at his past, garnering elements towards his self-knowledge. As far as the message of *Oedipus at Colonus* is concerned, it could be argued that Oedipus passed in time over the threshold of the doors of Law

only meant for him. What is not yet clear is whether such as assertion can be made for Joseph K. as well.

When Joseph K. argued with the priest and tried to persuade him that he should not believe everything the doorkeepers said, the latter warned him he is on the wrong path, "one does not have to believe everything is true, one only has to believe it is necessary" (Kafka 172). K. found this miserable: "It makes the lie fundamental to world order" (172). If we accept K.'s premise that lie is the only truth in the world, the foundation and the basis of everything, truth herself becomes the victim of ubiquitous lie. And if there is no more truth, there is no more truthfulness; everything is mere construct that must be taken as necessary. Such loss of truth and truthfulness can only lead to nihilism. Kafka does warn that K. "was too tired to follow all the deductions that could be drawn from the story" about Law(172), but it seems that even in more propitious circumstances, he would not have reached significantly different conclusions from the ones quoted above.

4

K.'s last journey to the quarry bears many similarities with Oedipus journeying to Colonus, accompanied by his daughters Antigone and Ismene. K. was led by two men, "in frock coats, pale and fat, with top hats, apparently the non-collapsible kind" (Kafka 174).

From the very beginning, we are surprised that to K., they are "clapped-out old actors" from some obscure theatre. At the same time, it is made clear that they hardly say a thing, gesturing "like a mute" (174), something that ill accords with their possible theatrical origin. The question is therefore why K. perceives the last scene in the novel, which doubles up as the last act of his life, as a play, even a theatrical play. If we want to be precise, the novel started off with a similar consideration, about it all being a comedy that Joseph K. would not like to miss, as we read on page three of *The Trial*. This human comedy is about to end.

The similarity between these events and a theatre play needs to take a step back, to those elements that made theatre possible- the ritual. The ritual elements in the last scene are recounted in a way that makes them easily recognisable or, at least, makes it easy to discern their absence.

To start with, it is important how the gentlemen apprehended Joseph; one can deduce from their gestures that K. is about to die, that he will soon become, as Kafka puts it, inanimate matter.

As an example of a ritual gesture that presages the death of the main hero, let us quote the holding of the head of Achilles. It was supported in a special way by his mother Thetis, knowing that her son will not live much longer; such were the gestures adopted by mourners supporting the heads of the already deceased. Similarly, both gentlemen treated the living K. as if he were already dead. When still in the flat, they tried to take him under the arm; K. refused and only allowed this to happen in the street, in the public domain, the domain of ritual death. "But right at the door they took him by the arms in a way K. had never experienced before. Their shoulders were close behind his, they did not bend their arms but twined them round the length

of K's outstretched arms, and down below they held K.'s hands in a regimented and rehearsed grip which was irresistible. K. walked stiffly between them; all three now formed such a unity that if one were destroyed all would be destroyed. It was the kind of unity which hardly anything but *inanimate matter* can form." (Kafka 174 – 175) Kafka is astoundingly meticulous in describing this scene; it indicates that he must have been very familiar with the rules of ritual, or else he would not have compared this yet living mass with inanimate matter. Joseph K. was therefore "formally" dead even on his way to the execution.

The second important ritual element is connected with the willingness or compliance of the victim. One can say that K. initially tried to resist, as he knew that he was going to die and would no longer need much energy, so he decided to use it up for that purpose before the end. The ritual demanded that only willing animals or people were sacrificed, those who voluntarily gave themselves over to the slayer. No amount of resistance was acceptable for the offering. A good example of this is the sacrifice of Iphigenia that we meet in all the tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The latter two treat her death as an act of sacrifice, while Aischylos understands it as murder, identifying it as an outrageous and unacceptable offering. (Aeschylus 150) This was in accordance with the incipient law of the Greek polis, where the ancient obsession with demonic powers that made you commit all manner of acts was supplanted by the concept of an act punishable by law and that of personal responsibility. The first part of the Oresteia tells us that Iphigenia was callously thrown onto the altar, like a heifer. As the virgin resisted, they forced a piece of cloth into her mouth, so as to stop her uttering curses on the oikos. Such resistance was responsible for the fact that Iphigenia could not rise as a deer from under her father's knife and become a follower of Artemis. All that was left for the rebel was death, pure and simple- a case of murder.

As far as K.'s willing going to his death is concerned, there is an interesting question, which is why Kafka did not include Joseph's dreams in the novel. In his dream, K. saw a stonemason hesitated over entering his name on the headstone, until he willingly decided to die, which is entirely consistent with the above, particularly with Joseph's possible ritual death in the quarry.

The situation was reversed the moment the stiff threesome came across a woman, most probably K.'s adored neighbour, one of the most important women in his life, Fräulein Bürstner. Joseph immediately understood that any resistance would be useless. Moreover, he was overcome by unexpected joy and all three followed the woman 's footsteps with ease; she was now their guide. This was needed until they found the right way; after that, as we have seen, she was free to turn into a side street. It was as if Fräulein Bürstner had a task, to make sure K. was on the right path and did not succumb to the old mistakes. The reason why this had to be accomplished by a woman and why it was a woman who, in the last moment, tried to change K. the rebel into K. the willing victim, is possible to explain through K.'s immense faith in female help, expressed so often throughout the novel: "Women have great power. If I could persuade some of the women I know to work together to help me, I would be bound to succeed" (Kafka 165). The only way out of a world where he was the ac-

cused was precisely a woman, a detail that leads us back to the events in *Oedipus*.

To help sustain the argument, let us point out that "Colonus (the word for a Greek municipality, as well as a grave, a burial place), where Oedipus took refuge after long years, was a mythical place, a blessed place, where he entered as carrier of filth, while there was to be found the Garden of the Eumenides, the female deities of fertility and power." (Vrećko, *Between the Antique and the Avant-garde* 144), underworld goddesses with whom he was connected by means of his lameness and his name. Here, with the help of two guides, his daughters Antigone and Ismene, and in the company of underworld Eumenides, his life came full circle. He was in the place he had been in before and where, by rights, he should have died. He became the victim of the prophesied innate hamartia. It is therefore understandable that K.'s life also concluded with the help of a woman and that Kafka was clearly aware of this.

Before Oedipus left Thebes for Kithairon, Kreon warned him that not everything could be his: "Crave not mastery in all/ For the mastery that raised thee was thy bane and wrought thy fall" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1525). This was also followed by Kafka who put the self-critical words in his hero's mouth, words full of repentance: "I always wanted to grab at life, and not with the best of intentions either. That was not right... I'm thankful they have given me these stupid inarticulate companions for this journey and that they've left it to me to say what has to be said to myself" (Kafka 176). What was it that K. wanted to say to himself at that moment? What was the purpose of his internal monologue? Was this hope that the final knowledge would come, that it would have to coincide with death as the end of life, death as mere death?

The ritual procession also entails public ridicule. However, as the latter, like the majority of the events in this novel, happens at night, the only people they encounter on their way out of town are a few policemen; one of them even tries to check all is well with this suspicious threesome, an intention decisively stymied by K., with the two gentlemen having to follow his lead.

In *Oedipus at Colonus* that Sophocles wrote just before his death in 406 B. C., he allowed his hero the ritual death denied to him so long before. In the Garden of Eumenides, Oedipus ritually cleansed his body, offered libations to the gods and readied himself to depart this world. At that moment came thundering from the underworld. Mother Earth, who had been deprived of her offering of Oedipus three days after his birth, was now ready to take him to her. The oracle said he would sleep with his mother. Now the prophecy, in its primeval, ritual-mythological sense, will come true. The underworld goddesses have permitted him to lie in their furrows, without the danger of any revolting incest. Nor was the murder of his father any longer taken to be patricide. Oedipus was cleansed. Even though deprived of his earthly eyes, Oedipus saw everything and knew everything. After the agon between Polyneikes and Oedipus, where the father cursed his son, Oedipus spoke of 'first things', accompanied by incessant thunder and lightning. Then the messenger tells of all that was visible before the mighty light, when nothing could be seen any more. This mighty light was the epiphany of Oedipus. Called by the underworld and Olympus simultaneously, Oedipus knelt: "We saw him adore together the earth and Olympus of the gods in the

same prayer" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 1654).

Oedipus therefore, on his knees before Mother Earth and Olympus, said his prayer and went either to earth or was taken to the sky by a messenger of heaven. The Earth would receive him into her, with "painless cleaving of earth's base" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1662). For Sophocles, the redemption of his hero is all important; the direction of the departure is left open.

And what is Joseph's 'theophany' like? When they found themselves outside town, which "in this direction merged into fields almost without transition" (Kafka 177), they came to an abandoned and dreary quarry. Was Kafka's quarry also chosen as an earth's furrow, like the last dwelling at Colonus, given to Oedipus by Sophocles, where both heroes, Oedipus and Joseph finally lay with their mother Earth? This is where the last part of the ritual begins: the undressing of the victim, preparing him for his ritual murder. K. is now a ready victim, with his "willing cooperation" (177). They were very particular about the position of K.'s head, very important from the sacrificial point of view, as the head and later the skull was used as a signpost into the after world. There, ample space is provided for the spirit and consciousness, both of which were in short supply six foot under. That is why they took such care in placing K. s head on a large, loose stone and not, say, on the ground or just anywhere. The stone takes on the function of a sacrificial altar. However, they had great trouble finding the 'right' position for the head which would not be forced or improbable: "The one gentleman therefore requested the other to leave the disposal of K. to him for a moment, but even this did not improve matters. In the end they left K. lying in a position which was not even the best of those already tried" (177).

The above would indicate that the sacrificial ritual did not run according to plan, that Joseph K. was no longer representative of all those for whom he had to be the sacrificial lamb, as he was still thinking at the beginning of the trial. Then, he argued: "It's typical of the proceedings instituted against many people." He imagined that, "I speak here for those, not for myself" (Kafka 33).

He was now there in his own right; his death had no external reference. This however must mean that his human end was murder (slaughter) pure and simple, outside any ritual or cosmic concepts, as was the case with Oedipus. This is confirmed in what follows, when the "ultimate defect" was revealed.

> Then one of the gentlemen opened his frock-coat, and from a sheath hanging on a belt round his waistcoat he took a long thin double-edged butcher's knife/.../ The repulsive courtesies began once more; one handed the knife over K. to the other, who then passed it back above K.'s head. At this moment K. was perfectly aware it was supposed to be his duty to seize the knife as it hovered from hand to hand above him and drive it into himself. But he did not do this; instead, he turned his neck, which was still free, and looked about him. He was not able to prove his own worth completely, he was not able to relieve the authorities of all work; responsibility for this ultimate defect lay with whoever had denied him the remainder of the requisite strength. (Kafka 177 – 178)

The destruction of the ritual continued. Seeing his struggle with the authorities, K. should have stabbed himself; this would have taken the responsibility off the authorities and the court and made the matter a suicide. There can be no question of execution, as he was not condemned by any "high court".

As his posture was in no way in accordance with the prescribed position of a ritual, and what is more, K. kept moving, looking at his surroundings, rather than abandoning himself to the murder (ritual death), the gentlemen are forced to do the job themselves. Instead of a ritual killing, suicide or execution, there was a brutal murder. They finished off the unfortunately placed K.'s head and body like one finishes off a rabid dog. K. therefore died like an animal and not like a human being. After everything he had been through, it became clear that he will only be outlived by shame. The man died a shameful, animal-like death. Does this also mean that it was not given to him to complete the circle, as Oedipus was able to do?

This is another reason why it can be said that Kafka leaves things open and unresolved. Instead of a peaceful, ritual death, instead of a judicial execution, instead of a suicide, there was slaughter of a man who was throughout proclaiming his innocence. Can that be why, in the last moments of K.'s life, during his last movement of the head and body, "the casement window flew open like a light flashing on; a human figure, faint and insubstantial at that distance and height, forced itself far out and stretched its arms out even further. Who was it? A friend? A good man? One who sympathised? One who wanted to help? Was it one person? Was it everybody? Was there still help?" (Kafka 178)

Let us for a moment return to Kafka's short story, *The Dream*. One needs to add that Kafka often returned to the theme of the death of Moses (as, for example, in his short story *On Death Apparent*) which equally well collides with that of Oedipus; all this leads us to draw parallels between Joseph K. and Oedipus. Joseph wanted to go for a walk and the path took him in one direction only: to the cemetery, to his own grave, therefore to Colonus, where he fell to his knees. Three people awaited there: two gentlemen holding the headstone and an artist. At the funeral of Oedipus, there are also three people: Antigone, Ismene and Theseus. And as Oedipus was "incessantly" called by the underworld, and he had "waited and delayed for too long", so Joseph dallied, until twice, he was called by the cemetery knell, and then the artist's kicking at the grave mound. What follows is K.'s ritual wailing, corresponding to that of Oedipus. "Finally/.../ K. understood; there was no time left", as this was the only way he would be able to finish the inscription on the headstone. "K. finally understood that he came to his own funeral and that he has to put himself into the grave" (Hribar 249 – 250). Joseph dug into the soil with his fingers and the earth became friendly, maternal, no longer resisting, and once he penetrated the thin crust of the earth, it opened up to him his underworld dwelling and the impenetrable depth welcomed him in. "He was now capable of doing what he was not able to do during the execution. Without thought or fear he lowered himself into his own grave" (249 – 250). Thus Joseph finally came to having the whole of his name on the gravestone, having his reputation back and his own identity.

At the beginning of the novel we learn that Joseph K. was arrested without hav-

ing done anything wrong. He was without fault, just like Oedipus. With that, he entered the Socratic self-reflection about man's universal guilt, about the fact that being a man automatically implies guilt-reflection, therefore about man's inborn *hamartia*. And it will be this that will lead Joseph from the domain of objective guilt and *hamartia* into the domain of subjective guilt, his struggle with the world. The court trial therefore served as a reminder of his generic guilt, and only on that basis could he see the truth about himself, about his shameless interference with the world that destroyed his life.

His voluntary descent into the grave (colonus) absolved him of the indictment at the beginning of the novel, that he is guilty without being guilty, and also of his wanting to "grab at life, and not with the best of intentions either" (Kafka 176). In the novel *The Trial* itself, things remain unresolved in the end. Instead of a peaceful ritual death, instead of a judicial execution, instead of suicide in the quarry, a man was slaughtered, a man who never ceased proclaiming his innocence. Moments before the inhuman slaughter, shutters opened on a window and a man reached out towards Joseph, and Joseph, too, "raised his hands and spread his fingers wide" (Kafka 178). In the name of humanity, two people joined hands from afar. Kafka did not finish his novel by blinding his hero and did not place Joseph's coming to knowledge before the blinding itself. Such was also the sequence adhered to by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*. (Vrećko, *Between the Antique and the Avant-garde* 130 – 161)

And as the events in the quarry led him to knowledge but not redemption, it was necessary to continue in the short story *The Dream*, just as Sophocles needed to continue his *Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus*. The knowledge negated his inborn subjective *hamartia*, as just before his eyes were extinguished, he discovered that it was possible to extend one's arms in one way only - man towards man, and not in order to own the world. Only then was Joseph able to die blind and cleansed, but not redeemed. This would only come with his willing death at the cemetery, when he lowered himself into his own grave that would be his Colonus. Is it possible for Kafka to have stressed the grave so much without being aware of the conceptual connection between the grave and Colonus, and if, for him, the equation between Oedipus and Joseph were not complete, an equation with nothing carried over? Joseph K. and Oedipus are guilty without guilt, seeking salvation, finding themselves at two crossroads - Joseph at the entrance to the court and on his way to the quarry, Oedipus before the killing of his father and at the entrance to Colonus; they both receive knowledge before blinding and both opt for a willing exit from this world. Just as Oedipus was "temporarily freed" after blinding himself and was finally freed only at Colonus, so did Joseph continue with his everyday life after his arrest, until he "lowers himself" into the welcoming and maternal grave - colonus.

Oedipus is presented as "a hunter, pursuing, chasing and frightening the quarry, blundering in the mountains and sent scurrying by his pursuit, far away from people. However, in this hunt, the hunter turns hunted: Oedipus, pursued by the terrible curse of his parents, roams and roars like a wild beast, then pierces his eyes and flees to an uninhabited Kithairon" (Vernant 85). The notorious scene at the Titorelli studio shows how, under his brush, the painted image changed so that "it was

scarcely reminiscent of the goddess of Justice any more, nor of the goddess of Victory either; now it looked exactly like the goddess of Hunting" (Kafka 115). The trial against the accused Oedipus and Joseph could therefore only take place between two extremes, between justice and the hunt. Victory is won in Colonus - the grave.

Concerning the voluntary nature of K.'s choosing death, it seems particularly interesting to ask the question why Kafka failed to include Joseph's dreams in the *The Trial* and end the novel that way. Did Kafka leave *The Dream* out, as Sophocles, too, interred Oedipus outside the tragedy about Oedipus? Another proof that *The Dream* is part of the novel and that *The Trial* can be considered to be finished, if we read it against the background of the two Sophocles tragedies, that is, *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. It was not for nothing that Borges proclaimed Kafka the precursor of Sophocles.

Note

1. See Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Trans. F. Storr. All the citations of *Oedipus Rex* are from the websitehttp://socrates. acadiau. ca/courses/engl/rcunningham/Fall2008/1413/pdf/OedipusRex. pdf, and the line numbers instead of page numbers are listed here. In this article, line numbers are listed for all the citations from the website.

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