

## The Word Ongoing: Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and the Spirit of Perpetual Being

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### UNFINISHED TEXTS, FRAGMENTARY DREAMS

For the majority of writers, the goal is to finish. From the esteemed journalist working against the deadline to the college freshman writing an essay well into the night, the finished product is the objective; the act of writing only obtains value when the document at hand is crystallized. Naturally, more advanced writers acquire an appreciation for the process of writing — for the hours of planning, editing, researching, and reflecting; however, all this lauding of process disappointingly yields similar results. Once the text is finished, the process is over.

But what of the authors who leave their texts unfinished? Certainly, one could argue that the process of writing ends just as definitively when an author “gives up” as when an author completes a text, yet the compositional purposes of fragmentation hold implications one may pass over in disregard for incomplete documents. Julian Wolfreys writes, “Reading is . . . the experience of fragmentariness. It fragments and unveils fragmentation, citation, as inescapable . . . It only extends itself, through its own movement, its own fragmentation as the promise of future (as) fragmentariness.”<sup>1</sup> The same holds true for the act of writing. All writing is, in some sense, an expression of fragmentariness, and the conscious fragments, complete in their incompleteness, communicate the process of writing more genuinely than arbitrarily finished works. The philosophy within fragmentation operates “between system and systemlessness . . . it implies identity and totality by means of non-identity and incompleteness that inform formal gestures; it constitutes the immediate experience of what it ‘incompletes’ in infinite generations.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, in its unfinished state, the fragment holds greater potentiality than the finished work; the suspended process forsakes relevancy of the present in favor of the promise of the future.

Two authors whose work both suffered and obtained permanence due to fragmentariness are Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin. The result of personality, circumstance, and conscious decision, many of their texts are left incomplete, most notably their most ambitious works, Kafka’s novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and Walter Benjamin’s sprawling *The Arcades Project*. While their fractal writings largely denied both men recognition in their lifetimes, their similar proclivities toward fragmentation unveil more substantial living truths — truths that penetrate far beyond the scope of composition into the realms of messianic theory. This fragmentary journey holds pedagogical implications as well in which each author’s continual process speaks to imbedded relationships between author and the creative act in which every text, moment, and human life continually move forward in a perpetual state of becoming.

## INCOMPLETE TUNNELS

Franz Kafka once pronounced that he was made of literature, and thus it is befitting that much of his work bears a fragmentary spirit. Sara Loeb describes the relationship between Kafka's work and his splintered self:

Kafka's technique clearly shows that essence of the world is indefinable in conventional modes of literature. The enormous complexity of his life as a young Jew, living in the seam between three cultures, drove him to bear witness to the totality of life's hardships through the optimal use of literary tools.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his stories, Kafka indeed seeks to communicate that which is "indefinable" as his ruptured allegories, gasping like half-formed homunculi, only partially communicate topics that range from the nature of the artist, the quests for death, God, and absolution, and perhaps most famously, the law. Yet, Kafka's "failure" to complete these stories cannot be fully attributed to his lacking as a writer, for it is clear in the works published during his lifetime, Kafka possessed the capacity for such difficult translation. Instead, the unfinished nature of Kafka's texts seems to mirror the unreachable faces of his abstracted muses. In discussing *The Trial*, Joshua Kavaloski argues that "Indeed, *Der Prozess* is a radical project that resists the realist conception of temporal unfolding."<sup>4</sup> With a definite beginning and ending, *The Trial's* fragmentation (in which the legendary "Before the Law" parable operates both independently and embedded in the novel) provides an experience as though one traverses through but a few corridors of an infinite network. *The Trial* possesses the potential space for one to become lost for a lifetime; the number of episodes and their sequencing are inconsequential when challenging the futility of law which itself is a fragmentary entity where knowledge — dispersed among accused, lawyer, and court — is splintered and the quest for truth is never fully realized.<sup>5</sup>

However, Kafka's incomplete tales do not dwell exclusively on elevated, transcendent ideas. One of his greatest unfinished stories, "The Burrow," is among the purest balancing acts of metafictional form and content. From the perspective of (literally) the lowliest of creatures, a mole-like denizen, "The Burrow" could easily be interpreted as a story of the writing process and the joys and struggles of perpetual revision. Without question, the burrowing narrator buries his existence within his great creation: "Inside the burrow I always have endless time — for everything I do there is good and important and satisfies me somehow."<sup>6</sup> But it is that very symbiotic relationship that drives the narrator half-mad with paranoia as it trembles at the thought of weaknesses, interlopers, and perhaps most interestingly, false authorship: "Perhaps I was in somebody else's burrow ... and now the owner is boring his way toward me."<sup>7</sup> Here Kafka's story precedes postmodern intertextuality and the anxiety of influence, as fragmentation not only renders an author's work incomplete, but not purely the work of the author, as fragments and ideas from previous authors inform the direction of the text, fusing themselves into it like chunks of sediment. In this, "The Burrow" epitomizes the fragmentary process inherent in ongoing revision — burrowing, repetitious, and unfinished.

## HISTORY CRUMBLING LIKE MEMORY

In “One-Way Street,” Walter Benjamin writes that “to great writers, finished works weigh lighter than those fragments on which they work throughout their lives.”<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, Kafka would find a home in such sentiments; and, like Kafka, unpublished fragments compose a significant portion of Benjamin’s work. Moreover, similar motivations lead Benjamin’s texts away from cohesion as he “demonstrates a mode of writing, which is inspired by the experience of otherness ... an alternative to prevailing writing practices and understandings of writing.”<sup>9</sup> However, Benjamin’s utilization of the fragment differs from Kafka in terms genre placement, epistemology, and the philosophy of history. For Benjamin, history is not a single elegant tapestry, but instead operates as an infinite series of fragments culled from a multitude of perspectives and consisting of moments grandiose and mundane. As Benjamin writes in his theses “On the Concept of History,” “the chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between the major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, Benjamin opts to fragment history not only to unsettle it from the privileged few, but to effectively capture history in its totality. Gathering together and examining the historical refuse that other scholars would disregard, Benjamin is a historian devoid of discrimination, a theorist unafraid of the knowledge that falls outside his worldview. Benjamin’s concept of history — messianic overtones aside — is a humanist history where all individuals are welcomed to the table. Indeed, the role of the individual in history is described fascinatingly in an unpublished fragment written by Benjamin in 1932:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth.<sup>11</sup>

The soil of the self and the soil of history are one and the same. The fragments of our lives, mediated through language and memory, serve as historical material, ever-changing and utterly reliant on the subjective consciousness of the chroniclers documenting it. More importantly, the process of historical composition is without end as one must return again and again to the historical grounds of memory in order to chronicle the evolution of the shards, for the condition of history is never fixed, but rather continually separates and comes together, influencing our understandings of our pasts.

Benjamin’s greatest example of textual fragmentation is the incomplete work to end all incomplete works, *The Arcades Project*, his nearly one thousand page tome that sought to encapsulate the Parisian Arcades, and which, in its incomplete state, operates as nine hundred pages of tenuously sequenced citations with Benjamin’s commentary interspersed among them, discussing topics as variable as Marxism, boredom, Baudelaire, dreams, and architecture — about three dozen sections in all. Reading *The Arcades Project* is a dizzying chore as disembodied fragments flood the pages, jagged in their unfinished conditions, a cohesive meaning or voice of an author all but nonexistent. Yet, instead of dismissing the project as a casualty

destined for the scrapheap, many scholars have pontificated about the nature of the gargantuan *non text*. Jessica Dubow argues:

We can say that if ... *The Arcades Project* is as imperfect as it is perplexing, this is not to read it as a stylistic failure. It is ... both the impossibility of adequation between knowledge and its object and also, in full recognition of its social origins, the philosophical political necessity of making that impossibility *felt*.<sup>12</sup>

Much has been written to that effect. *The Arcades Project* obtains meaning through fragmentation and negation, mirroring the fragmentation of our lives and the inaccessibility of total knowledge. Nevertheless, Benjamin's text still smolders as the dividing line between process and product. As Susan Buck-Morss writes, "Now, it must not be forgotten that there is no *Passagen-Werk*. We are in a real sense confronting a void."<sup>13</sup> While this is certainly true in a "real" sense, *The Arcades Project* exists in forms both accessible and inaccessible. Within Benjamin's mind, the project, even as it spiraled out of control into permanent incompleteness, stood in abstracted concreteness; and this understanding is not entirely out of reach, but exists in the fragments of articles subsequently written about it, explaining it, and filling in innumerable gaps in the text. Furthermore, as a true work of history, *The Arcades Project* stands completed as major and minor events are placed side-by-side, sacrificing "finality for the incompleteness of history.... Benjamin's work holds a particular affinity with an intellectual climate in which grand narratives of historical progress ... are no longer in favour."<sup>14</sup> In lieu of traditional conceptions of history, Benjamin documented the fractured genealogy of the present, obliterating its immediacy by subverting the history's "continuum."<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, perhaps under the influence of Kafka's dream narratives, likened this subversion to aspects of sleep as he famously notes in Convoluted K of the project: "the first tremors of awakening serve to deepen sleep."<sup>16</sup> The blossoming of the present happens through the historical roots, splintering and growing under the soil below, and this growth serves as "the point of rupture at which past and present may recognize each other, not through a spurious theory of causation or progress, but in a moment in which the totality of the past is recognized in the present."<sup>17</sup> History, as dictated in *The Arcades Project*, functions as a dialectical relationship between present and past in which the fragmented shards of yesterday are continually reorganized to formulate today. Only an unfinished document of near infinite potentiality could properly seize history by the throat and present its crumbling face in the light of now. The unfinished process, frustratingly rendered in almost an outline form where one only aurally catches glimpses of completion, renders history not as "futurology and prophecy, but in the perspective of revealing the present."<sup>18</sup> In Benjamin's incomplete *magnum opus*, no rhetorical hindsight distorts the voices of the past, rather the voices of history sing in a fragmented chorus, their song the lifeblood of contemporary epistemology.

#### THE MESSIAH'S ENCROACHING HAND

Although Kafka and Benjamin employ fragmentation in differing genres, correlations and shared possibilities exist among the motifs of incompleteness within their work. One such correlation is a similar theory of the messianic often made possible by their unfinished texts. While both Jewish and secular, theorizing

the coming messiah held fascination for Kafka and Benjamin. With Kafka's greatest unfinished novel, *The Castle*, for instance, one could interrupt the protagonist, K., as a "messianic figure, albeit one that is not part of a metaphysical system but an ontological one."<sup>19</sup> One element contributing to this "ontological" messianism is the fragmentary nature of the novel itself. For the messiah to come into being, adequate space must be allotted, space that in a sense transcends the words written on the page. More importantly, an unfinished text allows for the possibility of messianic time to pervade the text. Naturally, content must be in balance with form for there to be the possibility of messianic time, but certainly *The Castle* strikes this delicate balance as K.'s quest for the castle swirls about in a disintegrating wind that swings a pendulum between the messianic and total dissolution, decisively incomplete "in keeping with the incomplete life of the modern soul in search of itself."<sup>20</sup> In Kafka's world, for something as remarkable and revelatory as the messiah's arrival to take place, it must first and forever be lost to us, concealed in the unwritten moments that the reader can only sense like the hot gas rising from a fissure. We can never "catch the messiah ... to do so would be to return us to the very delusion that the messiah's arrival (and departure) has voided."<sup>21</sup> Instead, we can only sense the messiah and ignorantly predict his coming as a misguided gesture toward hope.

Walter Benjamin's conception of the messianic has been written about far more extensively, yet relies just as heavily on theories of fragmentation. For Benjamin, the fragmented state of history will only reach completion with the messiah walking from his sacred gateway. In that moment, history will be finished and all will be fulfilled, and prior events, in lieu of disappearance, are once again made whole.<sup>22</sup> History's promise thus lingers on an increasingly fragmentary plane that requires nothing short of the Messiah's arrival for it to be fulfilled. The end of history correlates with the end of time, finishing it only when history is rendered meaningless. Therefore, the historical process, relating to Benjamin's messianism, is one of division, displacement, and ongoing hermeneutics. Historical interpretation is never fixed, but — as in Kafka — oscillates between the mundane and the messianic. Indeed, Benjamin's conception of messianic history seems influenced by Rabbinic Judaism where "the task of a historian and the goal of the archive is to disrupt that connection of a specific past to a specific view of the present."<sup>23</sup> As an eager proponent of textual/historical disruption, Benjamin sought the messianic potentiality of fragmentation in his own archives, which served as a fitting precursor to the technological evolution of historical documentation. Every moment destined for textual representation exists as a moment that has been document, is being document, and will be documented, and for Benjamin, that which will *never* be documented is simultaneously an impossibility as well as the final stone in the messianic gateway.

#### THE PEDAGOGY OF THE INCOMPLETE

In Kafka and Benjamin's texts, challenging and seemingly belonging to some distant, abstracted realm, one can lose sight of their pedagogical value. The act of writing held such personal value to them both that it becomes difficult ascertaining what they had to "teach" us. Still, the disconnected conditions of their texts possess

lessons that correlate to educational directives that seek to transcend the institutions and seek adherence with the very nature of how we live. Integral to this notion is that people, like texts, are never finished, but are in a perpetual state of becoming, and that education is perceived as “an unfolding and transformation of the self over time.... This unfolding is open-ended and always incomplete.”<sup>24</sup> In “Messianic Pedagogy,” Tyson Lewis unveils a manner of fragmentation and subversion of traditional roles, inspired by Paulo Freire and to a lesser extent, Benjamin: “The teacher does not have the language of emancipation; rather, the language must emerge through a mutual search, a quest for meaning of experience.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, like a finished text, education as an end institutes limitation: “By imposing on the child predefined subject positions allocated by the ‘natural’ order of things, an educational alteration attempts to exhaust potentiality in the form of actuality.”<sup>26</sup> Naturally, comparing the ontology of texts to that of human beings is problematic, yet the philosophical underpinnings that are inherent in the overbearing insistence of completion hold similar ramifications. As soon as something is finished — whether that something is a person’s education, a text, or one’s sense of self — the potentiality to become something else is severely limited: the ink has dried, the ontological inertia sets in. People suffer from a “poverty of experience,” which Benjamin describes not as a “yearning for new experience,” but rather a desire “to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty ... that will lead to something respectable.”<sup>27</sup> Completion, for Benjamin, represents a form of impoverishment. Furnished by technology, modernity, and crippling ideologies human completion represents a closure, a shutting off of new experiences and possibilities. Fragmentation of texts and of one’s self is a means to upset this stagnation. Kafka understood this reality as well, and thus incompleteness permeates the structure, the content, and the characters of his work. For Kafka, one finds salvation in the ambiguous nature of the self, in “our very inability to know, our recognition of ourselves as fragments ... [that] allows us to retain our individual existences. Lack of completion, then, insures fragmentation and ambiguity, insures the continuation of individual existences.”<sup>28</sup> While reputation often compels one to regard Kafka’s work as despairing, the glimmers of hope shine through the bureaucratic nightmares in order to reveal the indestructible within us. Even Kafka’s frequently frustrated and doomed protagonists seek to “participate in perfection. The longing for true experience, for ‘being at home’ in the full sense of the term.”<sup>29</sup> Both Kafka and Benjamin were, in a sense, exiles, out of sorts with their respective circles. As educators or simply as human beings, we have much to learn from their unfinished quests toward self-realization, quests that were destined to be ongoing, and although both suffered from the consequences of such a subversive undertaking, the fragmentary essences of their own existences subsequently created texts that encapsulated modernity’s frenetic chaos as well as the developing critical mind seeking to understand the rapidly evolving terrain.

FINISHED?

Of course, this essay now becomes hypocritical and reaches its conclusion. As

many writers do, I reflect on what I have written and consider the numerous incarnations this essay could have assumed, incarnations that did not make the printed page. Different roads could have been taken. Different citations could have been employed. This essay has countless abstract manifestations, many better and many worse than what has taken shape here, and in considering these possibilities, the fact that this version is somehow chosen seems arbitrary. Yet, this is what the process of writing yields. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it is a fragmentary process, and though many would argue that the essay here is the true fruit of the labor, more valuable fragments persist, ones that will compose future documents, and greater still, the knowledge and experiences culled by and for this composition yield qualitative returns beyond the printed page. Indeed, the writing process is one of continual self-actualization, and as Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin have shown, one that possesses implications that stretch far beyond the page into the self, stretching onward toward greater horizons, realized and otherwise. In narration, history, Messianism, and pedagogy — all of which wholly dependent on language — the incessant writing process, forever separating into fragments, springs eternal in the minds and pens of future writers. Like seeds spraying outwards from the branches of some great tree, the word continues.

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  3. Sarah Loeb, *Franz Kafka: A Question of Jewish Identity*, trans. Sondra Silverston and Chaya Naor (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 132.
  4. Joshua Kavaloski, "Fabula interrupta: The Rupture of Narrative and the Arrest of Time in Franz Kafka's *Der Proce*," *Modern Austrian Literature* 36, no. 3/4 (2003): 42.
  5. John McGowan, "The Trial: Terminable/Interminable," *Twentieth Century Literature* 26, no. 1 (1980): 3.
  6. Franz Kafka, "The Burrow," *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 342.
  7. *Ibid.*, 356.
  8. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1996), 446.
  9. Atsuko Tsuji, "Experience in the Very Moment of Writing: Reconsidering Walter Benjamin's Theory of Mimesis," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 44, no. 1 (2010): 134.
  10. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2003), 390.
  11. Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927–1934*, eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1999), 576.
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15. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, x.
16. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1999), 391.
17. Scott McCracken, "Random Patterns, Flashes of Insight: Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 7, no. 2 (2002): 281.
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22. Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 26.
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25. Tyson Lewis, "Messianic Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 2 (2010): 242.
26. *Ibid.*, 247.
27. Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927–1934*, 734.
28. McGowan, "The Trial: Terminable/Interminable," 7.
29. Loeb, *Franz Kafka: A Question of Jewish Identity*, 141.