Jean-Paul Sartre’s saying that “Kafka’s testimony is all the more universal as it is profoundly singular”¹ is indicative of a key paradox in the reception of Kafka during the twentieth century, a paradox that has wide-reaching implications for our understanding of the interface between literature and philosophy. It is characteristic of the philosophical reception of Kafka’s work that it is repeatedly invoked in the context of attempts to escape from universal notions that have been inherited from a modern foundational thinking; these notions include the subject, thinking, and existence. Of paramount importance in this context is the concept of singularity, which is at odds with philosophy’s ambitions, which have traditionally been expressed in terms of the universal and the essential. Philosophical attempts to counter this tradition frequently turn to modern literature in search of an experience of singularity that involves a sense of alienation that cannot be encapsulated by concepts. The striking frequency of references to Kafka in this endeavor (more so even than to other modernist writers such as Beckett, Mallarmé, Proust, or Joyce) is surprising, given that Kafka’s prose is characterized by rather indeterminate spatio-temporal representations and seemingly uninterrupted realistic descriptions. His writing has thus been widely praised for its rendering of a universal condition humaine. Kafka is indeed often regarded as the ultimate witness to the human condition in the twentieth century and, like Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe in their times, is attributed universal significance. Why is it, then, that Kafka can nevertheless be considered to have given the ultimate voice to the experience of the singular?

The paradox between the universal significance attributed to Kafka’s work and the references to it as a paradigmatic expression of a singularity that cannot be subsumed under any generalization engenders questions not only regarding Kafka’s specificity, but also about philosophy’s approach to his work. These questions require attention to how Kafka’s writings introduce singularity at both the semantic and the formal level in a radically inconspicuous manner, and to philosophy’s “double bind,” especially as concerns philosophy’s attempt to articulate the singular while inevitably resorting to its traditional tendency of conceptualizing its object of investigation. The contributions to this volume address, in a

variety of ways, the interplay between literature and philosophy that is at stake in this paradox.

An interdisciplinary approach is essential for a volume dedicated to clarifying the ways in which philosophy and literature are related to each other in Kafka. The contributions to this volume approach the paradox of the universal and the singular from a variety of perspectives and points of departure. While some treat the topic in straightforward philosophical terms and regard the universal in an ontological, epistemological, or phenomenological sense, others focus on it through more cultural and religious terms. The latter is particularly true for those essays in which Kafka’s Jewishness, and Judaism more generally, plays a central role. Some of the essays in this volume are devoted to showing a philosophical position or clarification of concepts in Kafka’s writings and their reception; others explore individual literary stories in order to show how they challenge pre-established concepts of the universal and invite us to reconsider the meanings of the universal. We did not wish to separate these two approaches into different sections, as this would suggest a dichotomy between a philosophical and a literary approach to the paradox of the universal and the singular in Kafka. Such a clear demarcation would resolve the paradox rather than expose it. Instead, we opted to structure the volume according to recurrent themes in the contributions: these include ambiguity as a tool of deconstructing the pre-established philosophical meanings of the universal, the concept of the law as a major symbol for the universal meaning of Kafka’s writings, the presence of animals which, in Kafka’s scenes and stories, blurs the divide between the singular and the universal, the modernist mode of writing as challenge of philosophical concepts of the universal, and the social and political meaning of the universal in contemporary Kafka reception. These themes constitute the five sections of the volume. In each, the interplay between philosophy and literature is illuminated in light of new approaches to the question of the universal.

In the first section, entitled “The Ambiguity of the Singular,” the meaning of Kafka’s literary work is reconsidered in relation to the philosophical discourse on the universal. The opening chapter, Stanley Corngold’s “The Singular Accident in a Universe of Risk: An Approach to Kafka and the Paradox of the Universal,” formulates concisely the main problem of the universal and the singular in relation to the work of Kafka: in short, do we submit this work to philosophical examination if we attribute to it a universal meaning or, on the contrary, do we read Kafka’s writings and learn from this reading in order to reconsider the meaning of the universal? In the former case, we apply pre-established concepts of the universal and the singular to Kafka’s work; in the latter we discover in Kafka’s writings new meanings of the singular and the universal. Corngold shows that one cannot separate these two directions of research and explains why: Kafka,
on several occasions, refers to a philosophical legacy of the universal, especially to “the pure, the true, the immutable.” Hence, Corngold initiates an inquiry on the philosophical in Kafka’s work while simultaneously declaring the primacy of his fiction for the confessional. Consequently, Corngold’s approach combines a clarification of the philosophical legacy in Kafka with a particular attention to the specific linguistic features and images of Kafka’s sentences.

In his “Philosophy and Ambiguity in Benjamin’s Kafka,” Brendan Moran examines the role of ambiguity in the manifestation of the paradox. He argues that not paradox but ambiguity is the philosophical element in literature. The paradox creates a straightforward opposition to the mythical, whereas philosophy reveals the intrusion of ambiguity in myth and opens a dimension of polyvalence (Mehrdeutigkeit). Moran focuses on ambiguity in Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Kafka’s writings and shows that Benjamin implicitly regards Kafka’s literary work as “a victory over Kierkegaard’s paradox,” according to which the individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute.

Starting from a remark by Theodor Adorno on Benjamin’s approach to Kafka, Søren Rosendal brings to the fore an astonishing relation between Kafka and Hegel in his contribution, “The Logic of the ‘Swamp World’: Hegel with Kafka on the Contradiction of Freedom.” In a traditional interpretation, this relation has been described as a radical opposition: Kafka expresses the singular experience of the individual exposed to and victimized by a universal, impenetrable system. Hegel, in contrast, develops a systematic logic in which the experience of the individual disappears. Rosendal, however, points to an intersection between Hegel and Kafka, which is the inescapability of contradiction within the structure of freedom: the possibility of a free act depends on the outer, objective space of action which is not empty but a “swamp world.” In order to demonstrate that Kafka and Hegel share a secret affinity, the author is particularly attentive both to the movement and fluidity in Hegel’s logic of contradiction and to the ambiguous ways of describing the protagonist’s actions in Kafka’s writings.

In the third chapter of this section, “The Necessary Revision of the Concept of the Universal: Kafka’s ‘Singularity,’” Arnaud Villani presents Kafka’s work as the starting point of a new thinking that facilitates questioning the ontological tradition of philosophy as a whole. In this tradition, the universal is thought conceptually by separating (abstracting) the meaning of all things from any marks of

the singular event from which it arises. The power of this thought results from the possibility to grasp (be-greifen, con-cipere) the essence of things. Kafka, however, restores the resistance of the singular via a thought that the author calls “abrupt,” because it cannot separate the specificity of each singular phenomenon from the presence of the whole. A thick, detailed, unstable writing that is able to undo evident conceptual relations or to realize unexpected conceptual cross-overs follows from this transformation of thought.

The volume’s second section, entitled “Before the Law,” collects three original approaches to the parable “Before the Law.” It is interesting to note that this text remains a major reference in reflection on the universal in Kafka, not least because of the concept and the figuration of law that it implies. In this short parable, which constitutes one of the central literary texts of modernity, the universal meets the singular in a paradoxical way. As noted in the story, “the law should be accessible for everyone at any time”; nevertheless the door through which one could gain admittance to the law is “only intended for you.” This contradiction, involving the concise settings of the law, challenges the reader to interpret the narrative’s most minute signs and details.

In “Am-ha’aretz: The Law of the Singular. Kafka’s Hidden Knowledge,” Eli Schonfeld finds in a Talmudic passage the source that may have inspired Kafka for this short story. The protagonist of the story, the man from the country who comes to the doorkeeper and requests admittance to the law, is, according to Schonfeld, the Talmudic figure of the am-ha’retz, who was associated in rabbinic literature with those who were ignorant of the law and opposed to the talmid chacham, the scholar of the law. From this starting point, the author recalls Benjamin’s distinction between law and Lehre and Benjamin’s preference, in his reflections on Kafka, for the latter. Interpreting the doorkeeper in the story as a figure of the talmid chacham, Schonfeld shows how Benjamin’s distinction functions in “Before the Law” and argues that this story reveals the place before the law as the place of predilection with regard to the law. This is contrary to contemporary interpretations according to which Kafka’s story expresses the idea of a fulfilment of the law – an access to the law – or the idea of a suspension or difference of the law.

From a different perspective, Arthur Cools, in his contribution, “Desire and Responsibility: The Case of K.,” joins in his interpretation of Kafka’s parable the idea that “before the law” is the law. However, his main focus is the protagonist Josef K. of The Trial, the novel in which the parable of “Before the Law” is told. Cools argues that the story “Before the Law” can be understood as a kind of abstract symbol of the narrative of The Trial, but he searches in the singular chain of images in this narrative for the signs that can reveal something about the nature of the law and the demand of having access to the law. In order to
approach the enigmatic meanings of Kafka's parable, the author examines whether, how, and to what extent it is possible to embed the narrative of *The Trial* into the Greek legacy of the tragic model. The opening scene of the tragic model is indeed the problem of being chosen or accused by a demand that is addressed only to the individual and to which she or he has no access, as is the case in *The Trial*. However, the examination reveals fundamental differences, in particular as concerns the concept of law: in Greek tragedy, the law is clear, but in default; in *The Trial*, however, the law is omnipresent, but not transparent. As such, Cools argues (against Zygmunt Bauman's interpretation, according to which Kafka's parable calls for a new approach to justice and responsibility) that the law in Kafka's narrative is not the expression of a universal idea of justice, responsibility, or freedom according to which the protagonist claims his innocence. In interpreting the chain of images in *The Trial*, he shows that the reverse is the case: the law and the demand to have access to the law are the expression of and are bound by the ambiguities of the protagonist's erotic desires.

Michal Ben-Naftali's contribution, “Derrida-Reads-Kafka,” deals with the presence of Kafka's “Before the Law” in Derrida's readings. She shows how the transcendence of the law, as figured in Kafka's parable and which Derrida avoids identifying in Jewish terms of the Tora, is a basic structure in Derrida's thought and operates in his reflections on the fictional moment of foundation, whether it is political, as is the case of his essay “Force de Loi: le ‘fondement mystique de l'autorité’” (“Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’”), or moral, as for instance in his interpretation of Freud's account of the origin of moral law. This basic structure is revealed in Derrida's approach to literature, in particular in what he calls the Biblical origins of literature. The main figure of this origin is Abraham, who keeps his secret and remains silent when he commences to prepare the sacrifice of his son Isaac. This secret and this silence delineates a scene and a space where the law remains inaccessible, where father and son are related to each other through the secret of the father, and where the son witnesses the silence of the father. In this way, Ben-Naftali points at an astonishing continuity in Derrida's readings of literary texts which relates the Biblical narrative of Abraham to Kafka's parable “Before the Law” through a reading of Kafka's “Letter to His Father.” In light of this continuity, she argues, Kafka's parable “Before the Law” becomes a kind of symbol for the nature of the literary work as such.

The animal is the central issue in the volume's third section, entitled “Animals.” There are unquestionably many animal figures in Kafka's writing. They seem to express each time an experience of singularity *par excellence* not

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only because they do not fit into the concepts and categories of human existence, but moreover because they are related to an experience of a unique event, as is the case in the story of the giant mole and in “The Metamorphosis.” However, in Kafka’s narratives, these events influence human interactions and disturb the apparently evident concepts of human understandings.

Rodolphe Gasché’s contribution, “Of Mammoth Smallness: Franz Kafka’s ‘The Village Schoolmaster,’” is a close reading of Kafka’s story “The Village Schoolmaster [The Giant Mole]” and a fascinating examination of the struggle in this story between the schoolmaster of the country and the narrator, the businessman of the city. Gasché brings to the fore the meanings of the giant mole as a key element of his interpretation of this narration although the presence of the mole is most elusive in the story. In establishing a surprising similarity with the structure of the singular and the universal in the story “Before the Law,” the author carefully shows how the unique (in)significance of the giant mole determines the protagonists’ interactions and transforms the traditional concepts of the universal. In this way, he demonstrates why a widespread assumption in Kafka scholarship – that Kafka’s heroes are the victims of an oppressive bureaucratic system – is in fact mistaken.

In his contribution, “Irreducible Pluralities: The Jewish Legacy of Franz Kafka,” David Suchoff addresses the question of the universal from a different perspective, that of Kafka’s humour. Laughter is the capacity of obtaining pleasure from the failure of matching universal categories. Kafka, according to Suchoff, finds a specific Jewish way to express this capacity. Suchoff thus addresses particular attention to Kafka’s multiple languages: his interest in Yiddish theatre, his rewritings of the story of Abraham, his attitude towards the German language. In this reflection, the presence of the animal figures in Kafka’s writings, as is the case in “Report to an Academy” and “Investigations of a Dog,” plays a major role because the animals encourage one to de-identify with the German language or to undermine the authority of the relation to the father or to discover the gaps in the legacy of the past. In this way, Kafka invites us to the experience of laughter, “that animal in us all.”

Kafka’s bestiary is the central core of Anna Glazova’s original approach in her contribution, “Kafka’s Cat-Lamb: The Hybridization of Genesis and Taxonomy.” Glazova is interested in the phenomenon of hybridization in Kafka’s writings which undermines and resists conceptualization. In her approach, this phenomenon is not limited to the imagination of the figure of a hybrid, but includes a linguistic aspect: a cross-over between proper names and animal figures. In this respect, hybridization transforms the signifying function of general terms. Glazova examines in particular the hybrid figure of the cat-lamb in Kafka’s story “A Crossbred,” showing a genealogy from two conflicting names from Kafka’s
paternal and maternal bloodlines: Kafka means “jackdaw” in Czech; Loewy derives from “Löwe,” or “lion.” Being a child of both means to be a bird and a cat, a prey and a predator. In a fascinating deepening of Kafka’s Jewish taxonomy of animals, Glazova shows that the hybridization is not just a linguistic tool to express the singular: in fact, it still conceals a logic, the logic of sacrifice, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac.

The chapters of the fourth section, entitled “Modernism,” resituate and reconsider certain features of modernism in Kafka’s work in light of the question of the universal. How does the attention to the specific conditions of literary production concern and transform the universalist concept of literature that is traditionally based upon the ethical function attributed to literature? This is the central question in Jean-Michel Rabaté’s contribution, “Kafka’s Anti-Epiphanies.” He calls attention to Kafka’s aphorisms, especially the Zürau aphorisms, which are, according to the author, the ultimate expressive form of Kafka’s modernism. In order to understand how this fragmentary form mediates between the universal and the particular, Rabaté compares Kafkan aphorism to the Joycean epiphanies. He details an interesting similarity between them with regard to the concept of truth, which is not destroyed but plays a role as a decentering tool in discourse. Yet he also mentions an important difference: whereas Kafka continues to refer to the Jewish framework of messianic promise, Joyce contents himself with the promise of a text to come.

In “Modernism’s Particulars, Oscillating Universals, and Josefine’s Singular Singing,” Lorraine Markotic situates Kafka’s modernism into the broader field of modernity. Focussing on Kafka’s short narratives, she analyses different stylistic and semantic strategies that Kafka invents in order to destabilize the dialectic connection between the universal and the particular: the universal loses its function of comprehension and is neutralized as something meaninglessness; the particular is not temporally located or individualized but is instead permeated by abstract, undefinable power relations. Kafka did not intend, the author concludes, to grasp the universal through the particular; on the contrary, in his writings they become indistinguishable. Markotic shows how this is at stake in Kafka’s short story “Josefine, the Singer.” Commenting on Derrida’s reflections on the gift and the reciprocity that follows from it, she notes that in Kafka’s story one cannot even be certain about who is giving and who is receiving. In this respect, the story does not afford any means to clarify whether Josefine’s singing can be considered as something particular or as something universal.

The last chapter of this section, Galili Shahar’s “The Alarm Clock: The Times of Gregor Samsa,” is devoted to the different dimensions of temporality in Kafka’s story “The Metamorphosis.” Shahar examines the complex time structures of the modernist narrative. Here, the universal is represented by the mechanical time of
the alarm clock in Samsa’s room, which introduces the mechanization of human existence and the return of the creaturely body with its gestures, noises, and cries. Shahar confronts this mechanical time with another time in the story, one that is revealed by the writing desk in Samsa’s room, namely, the time of the student and the years of childhood, the time of writing. This time escapes the mechanized time of the alarm clock, because it is a condensed time. The author describes the tensions, inversions, and distortions of these time structures in order to define the event of literary writing.

A volume dedicated to Kafka and the universal must contend with contemporary Kafka reception and assess in particular the social and political meanings that Kafka’s work evokes. The contributions collected in the final section, entitled “After Kafka,” discuss three main positions in the Kafka reception. In “Reading Kafka: A Personal Story,” Shimon Sandbank retraces his readings of Kafka from Walter Benjamin to Gilles Deleuze to Jacques Derrida. At the beginning and the end of this line of explication, the author refers to what he calls Kafka’s “cancellation technique”: the different linguistic modalities of retreating and negating what has just been said. This technique destabilizes the establishment of any fixed general meaning. Benjamin’s distinction between doctrine and fiction was an eye-opener for the elusive traces of transcendence yet it was unable to account for the singular negativity in Kafka’s writings. This also applies to Deleuze and Guattari: they were the first to state the immanence of law, which is, however, incompatible with Kafka’s negativity. For this reason, Derrida replaced the others: deconstruction, according to Sandbank, is quite close to Kafka’s cancellation technique. However, Sandbank underscores an important difference: whereas the deferral of meaning is an effect of language, according to Derrida, in Kafka it is not language but the writer who doubts, negates assumptions, and undermines the meanings of what has been written.

In “Kafka, Pro and Contra: Günther Anders’s Holocaust Book,” Kata Gellen traces a completely different position in the reception of Kafka, that of Günther Anders. Anders was sharply critical of Kafka. He considered that Kafka helped to absolve a generation of Nazi sympathizers from their guilt through his having invented a world in which guilt and punishment are uncoupled. Gellen draws particular attention to Anders’s interpretation of Kafka’s Jewishness, which he claimed was infected by a secular, universalist theology that is actually Christian. For this reason, Anders considers that Kafka’s view of guilt is not Jewish, since it is based upon a conception of original sin and redemption. In this respect, one understands better the central core of Anders’s critique – that Kafka betrays his Jewishness – and Anders’s diagnosis of the resurgence of interest in Kafka in post-war Germany. Gellen does not hesitate to discuss the main problems of Anders’s position in the contemporary reception of Kafka. However, for her, the
importance of Anders’s Kafka book lies in the possibility to reread Kafka in relation to the Holocaust without ascribing to Kafka’s descriptions of suffering and loss a predictive value.

“The position in which thought finds itself after 1945 forces Hannah Arendt to leave the realm of philosophy and turn to literature [to Kafka]”: this sentence, at the beginning of the final contribution, Birgit R. Erdle’s “Dis/Placing Thought: Franz Kafka and Hannah Arendt,” summarizes one of the central ideas to which this volume is dedicated. For Arendt, who refers to the fragments “He” in Kafka’s journals, the grounds of reality (der Boden der Tatsachen) have changed and this change is marked by the fact that thinking and reality are no longer linked with one another. It immediately reveals the philosophical condition of the significance of Kafka’s work to which Arendt refers in order to shed light on this gap between thinking and reality, which is also a “gap between past and future.” According to Arendt’s readings, Kafka enables a prolongation of the struggle between the two extremes of the gap without searching to bridge the abyss or to jump into the timeless sphere of metaphysics. According to Erdle, however, Arendt is too much in search for a metaphor in Kafka’s “He” fragments to name the new place of thinking. Erdle detects yet another meaning in these fragments, namely, that of the outside of the law and the specific Jewish experience of time.

This volume is the result of a fruitful collaboration, not only between the editors but also among many colleagues, primarily the participants of two different conferences, one on “Kafka and His Readers,” held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2012, the other on “Kafka and the Paradox of the Universal,” organized at the University of Antwerp in 2013. We invited several scholars to write additional papers for the volume. We thank them for accepting this invitation and enriching the scope of this book, and the participants of the two conferences for lively and enlightening discussions and for their contributions to this volume. The publication of this book would not have been possible without the support of a number of people and institutions: the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp, the Ministry of Education of the Flemish Community, the FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, Flanders), and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We thank Jeremy Schreiber for his careful editing of the manuscript; his attentiveness to the nuances of the English language greatly improved the volume. We are deeply grateful to Manuela Gerlof of De Gruyter for her encouragement throughout the production of this book, and last but not least to Irene Kacandes, the editor of the series “Interdisciplinary German Cultural Studies,” for her inspiring guidance. We hope the readers of this book will share our sense that this volume participates in important ways in exploring the interface between literature and philosophy and Kafka’s role in this relationship.