Franz Kafka’s attitudes toward writing and memory allow us to reassess the critical significance of his contribution to Modernism as a meditation on the meaning of signs as sites of resistance to hermeneutical closure. In examining key works, we will have recourse to Kafka’s intellectual relationship to Nietzsche as revealed in questions of language, meaning and ethical experience. Our reading of major texts will not assume that Kafka followed Nietzsche in the strict sense but that his approach to fiction employs literature in order to show how language operates in textual experience. Nietzsche’s view of language, which constitutes a semiotics of wandering, metaphorical dispersal, and semantic difference, anticipates Kafka’s production of signatures, a remarkable series of inscriptions that cannot be assimilated to history. Therefore, in contrast to our reading of Joyce, we shall approach Kafka as a writer who responded to the role of the non-historical aspects of Nietzsche’s achievement in producing a body of work that is irreducible to its peculiar contexts. What we require is a new reading of crucial texts that challenges the view that memory serves a merely conciliatory role in Kafka’s fiction. Our approach to Kafka will finally specify how his work is ethical in the sense of promising an open future that is irreducible to the dictums of the past.

Reading Kafka in semiotic context
In his influential critical study, *The Disinherited Mind*, Erich Heller distinguishes his own position on Kafka as a writer from that of Max Brod and Edwin Muir, who read Kafka’s novels as religious allegories that enable us to correlate literary content and spiritual meaning.¹

Heller rejects this method of reading as an attempt to assimilate the novels to a reductive psychology and tries instead to interpret creative work as a personal response to psychic conflict. And yet, while rejecting overt religious approaches, Heller reinstates the possibility of theological interpretation in declaring that Kafka’s novels might be read symbolically, since they provide the concrete grounds for shared meaning. Instead of offering us an occasion for the cognitive recognition of abstract qualities, the novels refer to a double reality (both lived experience and spiritual meaning) that the reader is invited to fuse in the apprehension of symbolic meaning. This critical model would unite writer and reader in a single quest for transcendent truth.

At the same time, in admitting that Kafka’s fiction is at least partially allegorical, Heller prevents his symbolic model of reading from being applied to obvious aspects of Kafka’s work. The use of names, situations, and messages in The Castle (Das Schloss, 1922) do not seem to add up to a total meaning. Furthermore, Heller acknowledges that the world evoked is wholly intractable:

Kafka represents the absolute reversal of German idealism. If it is Hegel’s fictional belief that in the Absolute truth and existence are one, for Kafka it is precisely through the Absolute that they are forever divided.

This obstacle to symbolic reconciliation is underscored in Heller’s description of Kafka’s Gnosticism, which constitutes the negative theology that situates the literary text in an oppositional framework.

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2 Ibid., 206.
3 Ibid., 209.
4 Charles Bernheimer criticized Heller’s allegorical reading in an influential work, Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982, 190-94. Bernheimer notes that, while Heller argues in favor of symbol, the terms of his argument are generally abstract and that his “humanistic” reading underplays the role of unintelligibility in the allegorical quest.
6 Bernheimer suggests that Walter Benjamin’s apparent Gnosticism aligns him with Kafka and partially explains his preference for allegory over symbol (see Bernheimer, Flaubert and Kafka, 192-98). Corngold perceptively argues that we should approach his writing as “a lower-case gnosticism, importantly including mythic elements of his own devising” (see Stanley Corngold, Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka, Princeton and Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2004, 11).