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Essays in Understanding

1930-1954



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Franz Kafka: A Revaluation

ON THE OCCASION OF THE
TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

TWENTY YEARS AGO, in the summer of 1924, Franz Kafka died at the age of forty. His reputation grew steadily in Austria and Germany during the twenties and in France, England, and America during the thirties. His admirers in these countries, though strongly disagreeing about the inherent meaning of his work, agree, oddly enough, on one essential point: All of them are struck by something new in his art of storytelling, a quality of modernity which appears nowhere else with the same intensity and unequivocalness. This is surprising, because Kafka—in striking contrast with other favorite authors of the intelligentsia—engaged in no technical experiments whatsoever; without in any way changing the German language, he stripped it of its involved constructions until it became clear and simple, like everyday speech purified of slang and negligence. The simplicity, the easy naturalness of his language may indicate that Kafka's modernity and the difficulty of his work have very little to do with that modern complication of the

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inner life which is always looking out for new and unique techniques to express new and unique feelings. The common experience of Kafka's readers is one of general and vague fascination, even in stories they fail to understand, a precise recollection of strange and seemingly absurd images and descriptions—until one day the hidden meaning reveals itself to them with the sudden evidence of a truth simple and incontestable.

Let us begin with the novel *The Trial*, about which a small library of interpretations has been published. It is the story of a man who is tried according to laws which he cannot discover and finally is executed without having been able to find out what it is all about.

In his search for the real reasons for his ordeal, he learns that behind it "a great organization is at work which . . . not only employs corrupt wardens, stupid inspectors, and examining magistrates . . . but also has at its disposal a judicial hierarchy of high, indeed of the highest, rank, with an indispensable and numerous retinue of servants, clerks, police and other assistants, perhaps even hangmen." He hires an advocate, who tells him at once that the only sensible thing to do is to adapt oneself to existing conditions and not to criticize them. He turns to the prison chaplain for advice, and the chaplain preaches the hidden greatness of the system and orders him not to ask for the truth, "for it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must accept it as necessary." "A melancholy conclusion," said K.; "it turns lying into a universal principle."

The force of the machinery in which the K. of *The Trial* is caught lies precisely in this appearance of necessity, on the one hand, and in the admiration of the people for necessity, on the other. Lying for the sake of necessity appears as something sublime; and a man who does not submit to the machinery, though submission may mean his death, is regarded as a sinner against some kind of divine order. In the case of K., submission is obtained not by force, but simply through increase in the feeling of guilt of which the unbased accusation was the origin in the accused man. This feeling, of course, is based in the last instance on the fact that no man is free from guilt. And since K., a busy bank employee, has never had time to ponder such generalities, he is induced to explore certain unfamiliar regions of his ego. This in turn leads him into confusion, into mistaking the organized and wicked evil of the world surrounding him for some necessary expression of that general guiltiness which is harmless and almost innocent if compared with the ill will that

turns "lying into a universal principle" and uses and abuses even man's justified humbleness.

The feeling of guilt, therefore, which gets hold of K. and starts an interior development of its own, changes and models its victim until he is fit to stand trial. It is this feeling which makes him capable of entering the world of necessity and injustice and lying, of playing a role according to the rules, of adapting himself to existing conditions. This interior development of the hero—his *education sentimentale*—constitutes a second level of the story which accompanies the functioning of the bureaucratic machine. The events of the exterior world and the interior development coincide finally in the last scene, the execution, an execution to which, although it is without reason, K. submits without struggle.

It has been characteristic of our history-conscious century that its worst crimes have been committed in the name of some kind of necessity or in the name—and this amounts to the same thing—of the "wave of the future." For people who submit to this, who renounce their freedom and their right of action, even though they may pay the price of death for their delusion, anything more charitable can hardly be said than the words with which Kafka concludes *The Trial*: "It was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him."

That *The Trial* implies a critique of the pre-war Austro-Hungarian bureaucratic regime, whose numerous and conflicting nationalities were dominated by a homogeneous hierarchy of officials, has been understood from the first appearance of the novel. Kafka, an employee of a workmen's insurance company and a loyal friend of many eastern European Jews for whom he had had to obtain permits to stay in the country, had a very intimate knowledge of the political conditions of his country. He knew that a man caught in the bureaucratic machinery is already condemned; and that no man can expect justice from judicial procedures where interpretation of the law is coupled with the administering of lawlessness, and where the chronic inaction of the interpreters is compensated by a bureaucratic machine whose senseless automatism has the privilege of ultimate decision. But to the public of the twenties, bureaucracy did not seem an evil great enough to explain the horror and terror expressed in the novel. People were more frightened by the tale than by the real thing. They looked therefore for other, seemingly deeper, interpretations, and they found them, following the fashion of the day,

in a mysterious depiction of religious reality, the expression of a terrible theology.

The reason for this misinterpretation, which in my opinion is as fundamental, though not as crude, a misunderstanding as the psychoanalytical variety, is of course to be found in Kafka's work itself. It is true, Kafka depicted a society which had established itself as a substitute for God, and he described men who looked upon the laws of society as though they were divine laws—unchangeable through the will of men. In other words, what is wrong with the world in which Kafka's heroes are caught is precisely its deification, its pretense of representing a divine necessity. Kafka wants to destroy this world by exposing its hideous and hidden structure, by contrasting reality and pretense. But the modern reader, or at least the reader of the twenties, fascinated by paradoxes as such, and attracted by mere contrasts, was no longer willing to listen to reason. His understanding of Kafka reveals more about himself than about Kafka—reveals his fitness for this society, even if it be the fitness of an "élite"; and he is quite serious when it comes to Kafka's sarcasm about the lying necessity and the necessary lying as divine law.

Kafka's next great novel, *The Castle*, brings us back to the same world, which this time is seen not through the eyes of somebody who finally submits to necessity and who learns of its government only because he has been accused by it, but through the eyes of quite another K. This K. comes to it out of his own free will, as a stranger, and wants to realize in it a very definite purpose—to establish himself, to become a fellow-citizen, build up a life and marry, find work, and be a useful member of society.

The outstanding characteristic of K. in *The Castle* is that he is interested only in universals, in those things to which all men have a natural right. But while he demands no more than this, it is quite obvious that he will be satisfied with nothing less. He is easily enough persuaded to change his profession, but an occupation, "regular work," he demands as his right. The troubles of K. start because only the Castle can fulfill his demands; and the Castle will do this either as an "act of favor" or if he consents to become its secret employee—"an ostensible village worker whose real occupation is determined through Barnabas," the court messenger.

Since his demands are nothing more than the inalienable rights of

man, he cannot accept them as an "act of favor from the Castle." At this point the villagers step in; they try to persuade K. that he lacks experience and does not know that the whole of life is constituted and dominated by favor and disfavor, by grace and disgrace, both as inexplicable, as hazardous as good and bad luck. To be in the right or in the wrong, they try to explain to him, is part of "fate," which no one can alter, which one can only fulfill.

K.'s strangeness therefore receives an additional meaning: He is strange not only because he does not "belong to the village, and does not belong to the Castle," but because he is the only normal and healthy human being in a world where everything human and normal, love and work and fellowship, has been wrested out of men's hands to become a gift endowed from without—or, as Kafka puts it, from above. Whether as fate, as blessing or as curse, it is something mysterious, something which man may receive or be denied, but never can create. Accordingly, K.'s aspiration, far from being commonplace and obvious is, in fact, exceptional and scandalous. He puts up a fight for the minimum as if it were something which embraced the sum total of all possible demands. For the villagers, K.'s strangeness consists not in his being deprived of the essentials of life but in his asking for them.

K.'s stubborn singleness of purpose, however, opens the eyes of some of the villagers; his behavior teaches them that human rights may be worth fighting for, that the rule of the Castle is not divine law and, consequently, can be attacked. He makes them see, as they put it, that "men who suffered our kind of experiences, who are beset by our kind of fear . . . who tremble at every knock at the door, cannot see things straight." And they add: "How lucky are we that you came to us!" The fight of the stranger, however, had no other result than his being an example. His struggle ends with a death of exhaustion—a perfectly natural death. But since he, unlike the K. of *The Trial*, did not submit to what appeared as necessity, there is no shame to outlive him.

The reader of Kafka's stories is very likely to pass through a stage during which he will be inclined to think of Kafka's nightmare world as a trivial though, perhaps, psychologically interesting forecast of a world to come. But this world actually has come to pass. The generation of the forties and especially those who have the doubtful advantage of having lived under the most terrible regime history has so far produced know that

the terror of Kafka adequately represents the true nature of the thing called bureaucracy—the replacing of government by administration and of laws by arbitrary decrees. We know that Kafka's construction was not a mere nightmare.

If Kafka's description of this machinery really were prophecy, it would be as vulgar a prediction as all the other countless predictions that have plagued us since the beginning of our century. It was Charles Péguy, himself frequently mistaken for a prophet, who once remarked: "Determinism as far as it can be conceived . . . is perhaps nothing else but the law of residues." This sentence alludes to a profound truth. In so far as life is decline which ultimately leads to death, it can be foretold. In a dissolving society which blindly follows the natural course of ruin, catastrophe can be foreseen. Only salvation, not ruin, comes unexpectedly, for salvation and not ruin depends upon the liberty and the will of men. Kafka's so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open. These ruinous structures were supported, and the process of ruin itself accelerated, by the belief, almost universal in his time, in a necessary and automatic process to which man must submit. The words of the prison-chaplain in *The Trial* reveal the faith of bureaucrats as a faith in necessity, of which they themselves are shown to be the functionaries. But as a functionary of necessity, man becomes an agent of the natural law of ruin, thereby degrading himself into the natural tool of destruction, which may be accelerated through the perverted use of human capacities. Just as a house which has been abandoned by men to its natural fate will slowly follow the course of ruin which somehow is inherent in all human work, so surely the world, fabricated by men and constituted according to human and not natural laws, will become again part of nature and will follow the law of ruin when man decides to become himself part of nature, a blind though accurate tool of natural laws, renouncing his supreme faculty of creating laws himself and even prescribing them to nature.

If progress is supposed to be an inevitable superhuman law which embraces all periods of history alike, in whose meshes humanity inescapably got caught, then progress indeed is best imagined and most exactly described in the following lines quoted from the last work of Walter Benjamin:

The angel of history . . . turns his face to the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe which unremittently piles ruins on ruins and hurls them at his feet. He wishes he could stay—to awaken the dead and to join together the fragments. But a wind blows from Paradise, gets caught in his wings and is so strong that the angel cannot close them. This wind drives him irresistibly into the future to which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins before him towers to the skies. What we call progress is this wind.*

In spite of the confirmation of more recent times that Kafka's nightmare of a world was a real possibility whose actuality surpassed even the atrocities he describes, we still experience in reading his novels and stories a very definite feeling of unreality. First, there are his heroes who do not even have a name but are frequently introduced simply by initials; they certainly are not persons whom we could meet in a real world, for they lack all the many superfluous detailed characteristics which together make up a real individual. They move in a society where everybody is assigned a role and everybody has a job, and with whom they are contrasted only by the very fact that their role is indefinite, lacking as they do a defined place in the world of jobholders. And all of this society, whether small fellows like the common people in *The Castle*, who are afraid of losing their jobs, or big fellows like the officials in *The Castle* and *The Trial*, strive at some kind of superhuman perfection and live in complete identification with their jobs. They have no psychological qualities because they are nothing other than jobholders. When, for instance, in the novel *Amerika*, the head porter of a hotel mistakes somebody's identity, he says: "How could I go on being the head porter here if I mistook a person for another. . . . In all my thirty years of service I've never mistaken anyone yet." To err is to lose one's job; therefore, he cannot even admit the possibility of an error. Jobholders whom society forces to deny the human possibility of erring cannot remain human, but must act as though they were supermen. All of Kafka's employees, officials, and functionaries are very far from being

**Theses on the Philosophy of History*, IX. A close friend of Arendt, Benjamin took his own life on the French-Spanish border while fleeing the Nazis in 1940. See Arendt's "Walter Benjamin 1892-1940" in *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, New York, 1968. —Ed.

perfect, but they act on an identical assumption of omnicompetence.

An ordinary novelist might describe a conflict between someone's function and his private life; he might show how the function has eaten up the private life of the person, or how his private life—the possession of a family, for example—has forced him into abandoning all human traits and into fulfilling his function as though he were inhuman. Kafka confronts us at once with the result of such a process, because the result is all that counts. Omnicompetence is the motor of the machinery in which Kafka's heroes get caught, which is senseless in itself and destructive, but which functions without friction.

One of the main topics of Kafka's stories is the construction of this machinery, the description of its functioning and of the attempts of his heroes to destroy it for the sake of simple human virtues. These nameless heroes are not common men whom one could find and meet in the street, but the model of the "common man" as an ideal of humanity; thus they are intended to prescribe a norm to society. Like the "forgotten man" of Chaplin's films, Kafka's "common man" has been forgotten by a society which consists of small and big fellows. For the motor of his activities is good will, in contrast to the motor of the society with which he is at odds, which is functionality. This good will, of which the hero is only a model, has a function too; it unmask almost innocently the hidden structures of society which obviously frustrate the most common needs and destroy the best intentions of man. It exposes the misconstruction of a world where the man of good will who does not want to make a career is simply lost.

The impression of unreality and modernity with which Kafka's stories strike us is mainly due to this supreme concern of his with functioning, combined with his utter neglect of appearances and his lack of interest in the description of the world as phenomenon. Therefore, it is a misunderstanding to class him with the surrealists. While the surrealist tries to give as many and contradictory aspects of reality as possible, Kafka invents freely only in relation to function. While the surrealist's favorite method is always photomontage, Kafka's technique could best be described as the construction of models. If a man wants to build a house or if he wants to know a house well enough to be able to foretell its stability, he will get a blueprint of the building or draw one up himself. Kafka's stories are such blueprints; they are the product of thinking

rather than of mere sense experience. Compared with a real house, of course, a blueprint is a very unreal affair; but without it the house could not have come into being, nor could one recognize the foundations and structures that make it a real house. The same imagination—namely, that imagination which in the words of Kant creates “another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it”—is to be used for the building of houses as for the understanding of them. Blueprints cannot be understood except by those who are willing and able to realize by their own imagination the intentions of architects and the future appearances of buildings.

This effort of imagination is demanded from the readers of Kafka's stories. Therefore, the mere receptive reader of novels, whose only activity is identification with one of the characters, is at a complete loss when reading Kafka. The curious reader who out of a certain frustration in life looks for the ersatz in the romantic world of novels, where things happen which do not happen in his life, will feel even more deceived and frustrated by Kafka than by his own life. For in Kafka's books there is no element of daydreaming or wishful thinking. Only the reader for whom life and the world and man are so complicated, of such terrible interest, that he wants to find out some truth about them and who therefore turns to story-tellers for insight into experiences common to us all may turn to Kafka and his blueprints, which sometimes in a page, or even in a single phrase, expose the naked structure of events.

In the light of these reflections we may consider one of the most simple of Kafka's stories, a very characteristic one which he entitled:

A COMMON CONFUSION

A common experience resulting in a common confusion. A. has to transact important business with B. in H. He goes to H. for a preliminary interview, accomplishes the journey there in ten minutes, and the journey back in the same time, and in returning boasts to his family of his expedition. The next day he goes again to H., this time to settle his business finally. As that is expected to require several hours, A. leaves very early in the morning. But although all the accessory circumstances, at least in A.'s estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, it takes him ten hours this time to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening he is informed that B., annoyed at his absence, had left an hour before to go to A.'s village, and they must have passed

each other on the road. A. is advised to wait. But in his anxiety about his business he sets off at once and hurries home.

This time he achieves the journey, without paying any particular attention to the fact, exactly in a second. At home he learns that B. had arrived quite early, immediately after A.'s departure, indeed that he had met A. on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A. had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once.

In spite of this incomprehensible behavior of A., however, B. had stayed on to wait for A.'s return. It is true, he had asked several times whether A. was not back yet, but he was still sitting up in A.'s room. Overjoyed at the opportunity of seeing B. at once and explaining everything to him, A. rushes upstairs. He is almost at the door, when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and almost fainting with the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, only able to moan faintly in the darkness, he hears B.—impossible to tell whether at a great distance or quite near him—stamping down the stairs in a violent rage and vanishing for good.

The technique here seems very clear. All essential factors involved in this common experience of failure to carry out an appointment—such as overzealousness (which makes A. leave too early and overlook B. on the doorstep), misconcentration on details (A. thinks of the journey instead of his essential purpose in meeting B., which makes the way far longer than it was when measured without paying attention), and finally the typical mischievous tricks by which objects and circumstances conspire to make such failures final—are found in the story. These are the author's raw material. Because his stories are built up out of factors contributing to typical human failure, and not out of a real event, they seem at first like a wild and humorous exaggeration of actual happenings or like some inescapable logic gone wild. This impression of exaggeration, however, disappears entirely, if we consider the story as what it actually is: not the report of a confusing event, but the model of confusion itself. What remains is cognition of confusion presented in such a way that it will stimulate laughter, a humorous excitement that permits man to prove his essential freedom through a kind of serene superiority to his own failures.

From what has been said so far it may become clear that the novel-writer Franz Kafka was no novelist in the classical, the nineteenth-century, sense of the word. The basis for the classical novel was an acceptance

of society as such, a submission to life as it happens, a conviction that greatness of destiny is beyond human virtues and human vice. It presupposed the decline of the citizen, who, during the days of the French Revolution, had attempted to govern the world with human laws. It pictured the growth of the bourgeois individual for whom life and the world had become a place of events and who desired more events and more happenings than the usually narrow and secure framework of his own life could offer him. Today these novels which were always in competition (even if imitating reality) with reality itself have been supplanted by the documentary novel. In our world real events, real destinies, have long surpassed the wildest imagination of novelists.

The pendant to the quiet and security of the bourgeois world in which the individual expected from life his fair share of events and excitements, and never quite got enough of them, was that of great men, the geniuses and exceptions who in the eyes of that same world represented the wonderful and mysterious incarnation of something superhuman, which could be called destiny (as in the case of Napoleon), or history (as in the case of Hegel), or God's will (as in the case of Kierkegaard, who believed God had chosen him to serve as an example), or necessity (as in the case of Nietzsche, who declared himself to be "a necessity"). The highest idea of man was the man with a mission, a call, which he had to fulfill. The greater the mission, the greater the man. All that man, seen as this incarnation of something superhuman, could achieve was *amor fati* (Nietzsche), love of destiny, conscious identification with what happened to him. Greatness was no longer sought in the work done but in the person himself; genius was no longer thought of as a gift bestowed by the gods upon men who themselves remained essentially the same. The whole person had become the incarnation of genius and as such was no longer regarded as a simple mortal. Kant, who was essentially the philosopher of the French Revolution, still defined genius as "the innate mental disposition through which Nature gives the rule to Art." I do not agree with this definition; I think that genius is, rather, the disposition through which Mankind gives the rule to Art. But this is beside the point. For what strikes us in Kant's definition as well as in his fuller explanation is the utter absence of that empty greatness which during the entire nineteenth century had made of genius the forerunner of the superman, a kind of monster.

What makes Kafka appear so modern and at the same time so strange

among his contemporaries in the pre-war world is precisely that he refused to submit to any happenings (for instance, he did not want marriage to "happen" to him as it merely happens to most); he was not fond of the world as it was given to him, not even fond of nature (whose stability exists only so long as we "leave it at peace"). He wanted to build up a world in accordance with human needs and human dignities, a world where man's actions are determined by himself and which is ruled by his laws and not by mysterious forces emanating from above or from below. Moreover, his most poignant wish was to be part of such a world—he did not care to be a genius or the incarnation of any kind of greatness.

This of course does not mean, as it is sometimes asserted, that Kafka was modest. It is he who once, in genuine astonishment, noted in his diaries, "Every sentence I write down is already perfect"—which is a simple statement of truth, but was certainly not made by a modest man. He was not modest, but humble.

In order to become part of such a world, a world freed from all bloody apparitions and murderous magic (as he tentatively attempted to describe it at the end, the happy end, of his third novel, *Amerika*), he first had to anticipate the destruction of a misconstructured world. Through this anticipated destruction he carried the image, the supreme figure, of man as a model of good will, of man the *fabricator mundi*, the world-builder who can get rid of misconstructions and reconstruct his world. And since these heroes are only models of good will and left in the anonymity, the abstractness of the general, shown only in the very function good will may have in this world of ours, his novels seem to have a singular appeal, as though he wanted to say: This man of good will may be anybody and everybody, perhaps even you and me.