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On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death

Potemkin

It is said that Potemkin suffered from states of depression which recurred more or less regularly. At such times no one was allowed to go near him, and access to his room was strictly forbidden. This malady was never mentioned at court, and in particular it was known that any allusion to it would incur the disfavor of Empress Catherine. One of the chancellor's depressions lasted for an extraordinary length of time and caused serious difficulties; in the offices documents piled up that required Potemkin's signature, and the empress pressed for their completion. The high officials were at their wits' end. One day, an unimportant little clerk named Shuvalkin happened to enter the anteroom of the chancellor's palace and found the councillors of state assembled there, moaning and groaning as usual. "What is the matter, Your Excellencies?" asked the obliging Shuvalkin. They explained things to him and regretted that they could not use his services. "If that's all it is," said Shuvalkin, "I beg you gentlemen to let me have those papers." Having nothing to lose, the councillors of state let themselves be persuaded to do so, and with the sheaf of documents under his arm, Shuvalkin set out, through galleries and corridors, for Potemkin's bedroom. Without knocking or even stopping, he turned the door handle; the room was not locked. In semidarkness Potemkin was sitting on his bed, in a threadbare nightshirt, biting his nails. Shuvalkin stepped up to the writing desk, dipped a pen in ink, and without saying a word pressed it into Potemkin's hand while putting one of the documents on his knees. Potemkin gave the intruder a vacant stare; then, as though in his sleep, he started to sign—first one paper, the signature had been affixed, then the other, and the third left the room without further ado. He triumpedantly, he stepped toward him and to the doorkeepers bent over them. No one was paralyzed. Again Shuvalkin left empty-handed, is Kafka's tates, somnolent and unkenef of those holders of power in the office of an official!"—a decent table nowadays, a Michelangelo. If one can hardly see a portrait, or Klamm when he it is just that even the most is that of the gladiator after the office of an official!"—2

We meet these holders of power in the castle as secretaries, strikingly appear in the full height of them, the doorkeepers. One day, an important little clerk named Shuvalkin happened to enter the anteroom of the chancellor's palace and found the councillors of state assembled there, moaning and groaning as usual. "What is the matter, Your Excellencies?" asked the obliging Shuvalkin. They explained things to him and regretted that they could not use his services. "If that's all it is," said Shuvalkin, "I beg you gentlemen to let me have those papers." Having nothing to lose, the councillors of state let themselves be persuaded to do so, and with the sheaf of documents under his arm, Shuvalkin set out, through galleries and corridors, for Potemkin's bedroom. Without knocking or even stopping, he turned the door handle; the room was not locked. In semidarkness Potemkin was sitting on his bed, in a threadbare nightshirt, biting his nails. Shuvalkin stepped up to the writing desk, dipped a pen in ink, and without saying a word pressed it into Potemkin's hand while putting one of the documents on his knees. Potemkin gave the intruder a vacant stare; then, as though in his sleep, he started to sign—first one paper, the signature had been affixed, then the other, and the third left the room without further ado. He triumpedantly, he stepped toward him and to the doorkeepers bent over them. No one was paralyzed. Again Shuvalkin left empty-handed, is Kafka's tates, somnolent and unkenef of those holders of power in the office of an official!"—a decent table nowadays, a Michelangelo. If one can hardly see a portrait, or Klamm when he it is just that even the most is that of the gladiator after the office of an official!"—2

"Don't worry, you are well!"

"No," cried his father, "I was smoked with such strength that it ulcerated. Only one hand lightly touched
depression which recurred is allowed to go near him, ... This malady was never known that any allusion to it was made. One of the chancellor's secretaries was sent to the palace and found the dying Shuvalkin. They could not use his services. "If gentlemen to let me have those documents under his arm, for Potemkin's bedroom. He stepped up to the writing desk and reaching a word pressed it into his hands on his knees. Potemkin in his sleep, he started to sign—first one paper, then a second, finally all of them. When the last signature had been affixed, Shuvalkin took the papers under his arm and left the room without further ado, just as he had entered it. Waving the papers triumphantly, he stepped into the anteroom. The councillors of state rushed toward him and tore the documents out of his hands. Breathlessly they bent over them. No one spoke a word; the whole group seemed paralyzed. Again Shuvalkin came closer and solicitously asked why the gentlemen seemed so upset. At that point he noticed the signatures. One document after another was signed Shuvalkin . . . Shuvalkin . . . Shuvalkin . . .

This story is like a herald of Kafka's work, storming two hundred years ahead of it. The enigma which beclouds this story is Kafka's enigma. The world of offices and registries, of musty, shabby, dark rooms, is Kafka's world. The obliging Shuvalkin, who takes everything so lightly and is finally left empty-handed, is Kafka's K. Potemkin, on the other hand, who vegetates, somnolent and unkempt, in a remote, inaccessible room, is an ancestor of those holders of power in Kafka's works who live in the attics as judges or in the castle as secretaries. No matter how highly placed they may be, they are always fallen or falling men, although even the lowest and seediest of them, the doorkeepers and the decrepit officials, may abruptly and strikingly appear in the fullness of their power. Why do they vegetate? Could they be the descendants of those figures of Atlas that support globes with their shoulders? Perhaps this is why each has his head "so deep on his chest that one can hardly see anything of his eyes," like the Castellan in his portrait, or Klaamm when he is alone. But it is not the globe they are carrying; it is just that even the most everyday things have their weight. "His fatigue is that of the gladiator after a fight; his job was to whitewash a corner of the office of an official!"—Georg Lukács once said that in order to make a decent table nowadays, a man must have the architectural genius of a Michelangelo. If Lukács thinks in terms of historical ages, Kafka thinks in terms of cosmic epochs. The man who whitewashes has epochs to move, even in his most insignificant gesture. On many occasions, and often for strange reasons, Kafka's figures clap their hands. Once, the casual remark is made that these hands are "really steam hammers" ["Auf der Galerie"].

We meet these holders of power in constant, slow movement, rising or falling. But they are at their most terrible when they rise from the deepest decay—from the fathers. The son in "Das Urteil" [The Judgment] calms his spiritless, senile father whom he has just gently put to bed:

"Don't worry, you are well covered up."

"No," cried his father, cutting short the answer. He threw the blanket off with such strength that it unfolded fully as it flew, and he stood up in bed. Only one hand lightly touched the ceiling to steady him.
"You wanted to cover me up, I know, my little scamp, but I'm not all covered up yet. And even if this is all the strength I have left, it's enough for you—too much for you... But thank goodness a father does not need to be taught how to see through his son"... And he stood up quite unsupported and kicked his legs out. He beamed with insight...

"So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself; until now, you have known only about yourself! It is true, you were an innocent child, but it is even more true that you have been a devilish person!"

As the father throws off the burden of the blanket, he also throws off a cosmic burden. He has to set cosmic ages in motion in order to turn the age-old father-son relationship into a living and consequential thing. But what consequences! He sentences his son to death by drowning. The father is the one who punishes; he is drawn to guilt, just as the court officials are. There is much to indicate that the world of officials and the world of fathers are the same to Kafka. The similarity does not redound to this world's credit; it consists of dullness, decay, and filth. The father's uniform is stained all over; his underwear is dirty. Filth is the element of officials. "She could not understand why there were office hours for the public in the first place. 'To get some dirt on the front staircase'—this is how her question was once answered by an official, who was probably annoyed, but it made a lot of sense to her" [Das Schloß]. Uncleanliness is so much the attribute of officials that one could almost regard them as enormous parasites. This, of course, refers not to the economic context, but to the forces of reason and humanity from which this clan makes a living. In the same way, the fathers in Kafka's strange families batten on their sons, lying on top of them like giant parasites. They not only prey upon their strength, but gnaw away at the sons' right to exist. Fathers punish, but they are at the same time accusers. The sin of which they accuse their sons seems to be a kind of original sin. The definition of it which Kafka has given applies to the sons more than to anyone else: "Original sin, the old injustice committed by man, consists in the complaint unceasingly made by man that he has been the victim of an injustice, the victim of original sin" ["Er"]. But who is accused of this inherited sin—the sin of having produced an heir—if not the father by the son? Accordingly, the son would be the sinner. But one must not conclude from Kafka's definition that the accusation is sinful because it is false. Nowhere does Kafka say that it is made wrongfully. A never-ending process is at work here, and no cause can appear in a worse light than the one for which the father enlists the aid of these officials and court offices. A boundless corruptibility is not their worst feature, for their essence is such that their venality is the only hope held out to the human spirit facing them. The courts, to be sure, have lawbooks at their disposal, but people are not allowed to see them. "It is characteristic of this legal system," conjectures K. in Der Prozeß [The Trial], "that one is sentenced not only in innocence but also in ignorance." Lived prehistoric world. A man can only strive for atonement, the transgression is a destiny which appears hopeless to us: "... The very reason for the breaking away from the legal authorities, the willingness to lend oneself to a prehistoric world, writes this world. In Kafka the world is secret; by basing itself on more ruthlessly.

In Kafka's works, the conscious points of contact. In the same way, an illuminating saying. "... with: Official decisions are not final," said K., 'a sound observation,' said K., 'a sound observation,' a sound observation which appears in Kafka's world of filthiness, of which people, for example. "This is not the world as it was... It can't be the just punishment... So it must be the mercy show on them."
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but also in ignorance." Laws and definite norms remain unwritten in the prehistoric world. A man can transgress them without suspecting it and then must strive for atonement. But no matter how hard it may hit the unsuspecting, the transgression in the sense of the law is not accidental but fated, a destiny which appears here in all its ambiguity. In a side-glance at the idea of fate in Antiquity, Hermann Cohen came to a “conclusion that becomes inescapable”: “The very rules of fate seem to be what causes and brings about the breaking away from them, the defection.” It is the same way with the legal authorities whose proceedings are directed against K. It takes us back, far beyond the time of the giving of the Law on twelve tablets, to a prehistoric world, written law being one of the first victories scored over this world. In Kafka the written law is contained in lawbooks, but these are secret; by basing itself on them, the prehistoric world exerts its rule all the more ruthlessly.

In Kafka’s works, the conditions in offices and in families have multifarious points of contact. In the village at the foot of Castle Hill, people quote an illuminating saying. “We have a saying here that you may be familiar with: Official decisions are as shy as young girls.” “That’s a sound observation,” said K., “a sound observation. Decisions may have even other characteristics in common with girls.” The most remarkable of these qualities is the willingness to lend oneself to anything, like the shy girls whom K. meets in Das Schloß [The Castle] and Der Prozeß—girls who indulge in unchaste behavior in the bosom of their family as they would in a bed. He encounters them at every turn; the rest give him as little trouble as the conquest of the barmaid.

They embraced each other; her little body burned in K.’s hands. In a state of unconsciousness which K. tried to master constantly but fruitlessly, they rolled a little way, hit Klamm’s door with a thud, and then lay in the little puddles of beer and the other refuse that littered the floor. Hours passed . . . in which K. constantly had the feeling that he was losing his way or that he had wandered farther than anyone had ever wandered before, to a place where even the air had nothing in common with his native air, where all this strangeness might choke one, yet a place so insanely enchanting that one could not help going on and losing oneself even further [Das Schloß].

We shall have more to say about this strange place. The remarkable thing is that these whorelike women never seem to be beautiful. Rather, beauty appears in Kafka’s world only in the most obscure places—among accused persons, for example. “This, to be sure, is a strange phenomenon, a natural law, as it were . . . It cannot be guilt that makes them attractive . . . nor can it be the just punishment which makes them attractive in anticipation . . . So it must be the mere charges brought against them that somehow show on them.”
From *Der Prozeß*, it may be seen that these proceedings are usually hopeless for those accused—hopeless even when they have hopes of being acquitted. It may be this hopelessness that brings out the beauty in them—the only creatures in Kafka thus favored. At least, this would be very much in keeping with the fragment of a conversation which Max Brod has related.

I remember a conversation with Kafka which began with present-day Europe and the decline of the human race.

"We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts, that come into God's head," Kafka said. This reminded me at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as his Fall.

"Oh no," said Kafka, "our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his."

"Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know." He smiled. "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us."\(^5\)

These words provide a bridge to those extremely strange figures in Kafka, the only ones who have escaped from the family circle and for whom there may be hope. These are not the animals, not even those hybrids or imaginary creatures like the Cat Lamb or Odradek; they all still live under the spell of the family. It is no accident that Gregor Samsa wakes up as a bug in his parental home and not somewhere else, and that the peculiar animal which is half-kitten, half-lamb, is inherited from the father; Odradek likewise is the concern of the father of the family. The "assistants," however, are outside this circle.\(^6\)

These assistants belong to a group of figures which recurs through Kafka's entire work. Their tribe includes the confidence man who is unmasked in *Betrachtung* [Meditation]; the student who appears on the balcony at night as Karl Rossmann's neighbor [in *Amerika*]; and the fools who live in that town in the south and never get tired [in "Kinder auf der Landstrasse"].

The twilight in which they exist is reminiscent of the uncertain light that surrounds the figures in the short prose pieces of Robert Walser—the author of *Der Gehilfe* [The Assistant], a contemporary novel of which Kafka was very fond.\(^7\) In Indian mythology there are the *gandharvas*, mist-bound creatures, beings in an unfinished state. Kafka's assistants are of that kind: neither members of, nor strangers to, any of the other groups of figures, but, rather, messengers busy moving between them. Kafka tells us that they resemble Barnabas, who is a messenger. They have not yet been completely released from the womb of nature, and that is why they have "settled down on two old skirts on the floor in a corner. It was . . . their ambition . . . to use up as little space as possible. To that end they kept making various experiments, folding their arms and legs, huddling close together, in the darkness, all one could see in their corner was one big ball" [*Das Schloß*].

It is for them and their kind that the Law that is not trading qualities exhausted its period of time, and yet is only a law in that any order or hierarchy is in effect comes to mind in this context. What may be discerned in Kafka's silence is the Law that has been promised to the Sirens of the distance; the Sirens disappeared at the very moment when Ulysses did not use up the breath of the Sirens. Among Kafka's assistants there are Chinese whom we have forgotten. Ulysses, after all, is a fairy tale. Reason and cunning cease to be invincible. Fairies, over these forces, and fairy tales, he went to work on legends that he would make them as proof "that inadequate is a means of rescue." With the Sirens of *Die Sirenen* [The Silence of the Sirens] and *Ulysses* Kafka's Sirens are silent. Perhaps an expression or at least a thought comes to us from that intermediate and comfortable and silly—in which a fox, that not even the depth that the Sirens went to in the depths of its cellar, whose expression he describes: "Something of lost happiness, something of active present—yet real and unquenchable" [Mäuse].
proceedings are usually discussed; they have hopes of being settled out the beauty in them—which Max Brod has related. They have hopes of being settled out the beauty in them—which Max Brod has related.

In present-day Europe we come into God’s head,” and the act of God as the peculiar animal which Odradek likewise is one big ball” [Das Schloß].

It is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the hapless, that there is hope. What may be discerned, more tenderly subdued, in the activities of these messengers is the Law that reigns, in an oppressive and gloomy way, over this whole group of creatures. None has a firm place in the world, or firm, inalienable outlines. There is not one that is not either rising or falling, none that is not trading qualities with its enemy or neighbor, none that has not completed its period of time and yet is unripe, none that is not deeply exhausted and yet is only at the beginning of a long existence. To speak of any order or hierarchy is impossible here. Even the world of myth, which comes to mind in this context, is incomparably younger than Kafka’s world, which has been promised redemption by myth. But if we can be sure of one thing, it is this: Kafka did not succumb to its temptation. A latter-day Ulysses, he let the Sirens pass before “his gaze, which was fixed on the distance; the Sirens disappeared, as it were, before his determination, and at the very moment when he was closest to them he was no longer aware of them.” Among Kafka’s ancestors in the ancient world, the Jews and the Chinese (whom we shall encounter later), this Greek one should not be forgotten. Ulysses, after all, stands at the dividing line between myth and fairy tale. Reason and cunning have inserted tricks into myths; their forces cease to be invincible. Fairy tales are the traditional stories about victory over these forces, and fairy tales for dialecticians are what Kafka wrote when he went to work on legends. He inserted little tricks into them; then he used them as proof “that inadequate, even childish measures may also serve as a means of rescue.” With these words, he begins his story “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” [The Silence of the Sirens]. For Kafka’s Sirens are silent; they have “an even more terrible weapon than their song ... their silence.” This they used on Ulysses. But he, so Kafka tells us, “was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could pierce his armor. Perhaps he had really noticed (although here human understanding is out of its depth) that the Sirens were silent, and he opposed the aforementioned pretense to them and the gods merely as a sort of shield.” Kafka’s Sirens are silent. Perhaps because for Kafka music and singing are an expression or at least a token of escape, a token of hope which comes to us from that intermediate world—at once unfinished and everyday, comforting and silly—in which assistants are at home. Kafka is like the lad who set out to learn what fear was. He has got into Potemkin’s palace and finally, in the depths of its cellar, has encountered Josephine, the singing mouse, whose tune he describes: “Something of our poor, brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness which can never be found again, but also something of active present-day life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet real and unquenchable” [“Josefine, die Sängerin; oder, Das Volk der Mäuse”].
A Childhood Photograph

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a supremely touching portrayal of his “poor, brief childhood.” It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels, placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of about six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child’s suit. Palm branches loom in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the subject holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape arranged for them, and the auricle of a large ear seems to be listening for its sounds.

The ardent “wish to be a Red Indian” may have consumed this great sadness at some point. “If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a galloping horse, leaning into the wind, kept on quivering briefly over the quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there were no spurs, threw away the reins, for there were no reins, and barely saw the land before one as a smoothly mown plain, with the horse’s neck and head already gone.”

A great deal is contained in this wish. Its fulfillment, which he finds in America, yields up its secret. That Amerika is a very special case is indicated by the name of its hero. While in the earlier novels the author never addressed himself otherwise than with a mumbled initial, here, on a new continent, he undergoes a rebirth and acquires a full name. He has this experience in the Nature Theater of Oklahoma.

On a street corner, Karl saw a poster with the following announcement: “Today, from 6 A.M. until midnight, at Clayton Racetrack, the Oklahoma Theater will be hiring members for its company. The great Theater of Oklahoma calls you! The one and only call is today! If you miss your chance now, you miss it forever! If you think of your future, you belong with us! Everyone is welcome! If you want to be an artist, come forward! Our theater can use everyone and find the right place for everyone! If you decide to join us, we congratulate you here and now! But hurry, so that you get in before midnight! At twelve o’clock the doors will be shut and never opened again! A curse on those who do not believe in us! Set out for Clayton!”

The reader of this announcement is Karl Rossmann, the third and happiest incarnation of K., the hero of Kafka’s novels. Happiness awaits him at the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, which is really a racetrack, just as “unhappiness” had once beset him on the narrow rug in his room on which he ran about “as on a racetrack.” Ever since Kafka had written his “Nachdenken für Herrenreiter” [Reflections for Gentleman Jockeys]; ever since he had made the “new advocate” mount the courthouse steps, lifting his legs high, with a tread that made the marble ring; ever since he had made his “children on a country road” amble folded arms—this figure has “distracted by his sleepiness, time-consuming, and useless attains the object of his desire.”

This racetrack is at the mysterious place and time of Karl Rossmann’s condenizen without character, as it were. Here, as says in his Stern der Erlösung are—so far as their spirituosity or character, as it were. The classic incarnation, blurs characterless man—namely, something quite different. No matter how or when Kafka’s entire work could be thought of as having a definite symbolic meaning they tried to derive such a meaning from structural experimental groupings. This is, in an unpublished commentary, Werner Kraft perceives that Kafka’s entire work condenizen as a bell. This comes about in which his office is located. That bell is loud for a doorbell; it rings this bell, which is too loud for a doorbell. And it seems that Kafka’s gestures or break out into gestures or break out into gestures break out into gestures, and break out into without the more frequently he avoids explications or explaining them. wandlung” [The Metamorphosis]. Der Prozeß has the penultimate chapter, K. steps priest seemed to consider
on a country road" amble through the countryside with large steps and folded arms—this figure had been familiar to him. Even Karl Rossmann, “distracted by his sleepiness,” may often make “leaps that are too high, too time-consuming, and useless.” Thus, it can only be a racetrack on which he attains the object of his desire.

This racetrack is at the same time a theater, and this poses a puzzle. But the mysterious place and the entirely unmeaningless, transparent, pure figure of Karl Rossmann are congruous. For Karl Rossmann is transparent, pure, without character, as it were, in the same sense in which Franz Rosenzweig says in his Stern der Erlösung [Star of Redemption] that in China people are—so far as their spiritual aspects are concerned—“devoid of individual character, as it were. The idea of the wise man, of which Confucius is the classic incarnation, blurs any individuality of character; he is the truly characterless man—namely, the average man . . . What distinguishes a Chinese is something quite different from character: a very elemental purity of feeling.”8 No matter how one conveys it intellectually, this purity of feeling may be a particularly sensitive gauge of gestural behavior. In any case, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma harks back to Chinese theater, which is a theater of gesture. One of the most significant functions of this theater is to dissolve events into their gestural components. One can go even further and say that a good number of Kafka's shorter studies and stories are seen in their full light only when they are, so to speak, put on as acts in the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma.” Only then will one come to the certain realization that Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theater is the logical place for such groupings. In an unpublished commentary on the story “Ein Brudermord” [A Fratricide], Werner Kraft perceptively identified the events in this little story as scenic events. “The play is ready to begin, and it is actually announced by a bell. This comes about in a very natural way. These leaves the building in which his office is located. But this doorbell (we are expressly told) is ‘too loud for a doorbell; it rings out over the town and up to heaven.’”9 Just as this bell, which is too loud for a doorbell, rings out toward heaven, the gestures of Kafka’s figures are too powerful for our accustomed surroundings and break out into wider areas. The greater Kafka's mastery became, the more frequently he avoided adapting these gestures to common situations or explaining them. “It is strange behavior,” we read in “Die Verwandlung” [The Metamorphosis], “to sit on the desk and talk down at the employee, who, furthermore, must come quite close because his boss is hard of hearing.” Der Prozeß has already left such motivations far behind. In the penultimate chapter, K. stops at the first rows in the cathedral, “but the priest seemed to consider the distance still too great; he stretched out an
arm and pointed with his sharply bent forefinger to a spot right in front of the pulpit. K. followed this direction, too; in that spot, he had to bend his head far back to see the priest at all.”

Max Brod has said: “The world of those realities that were important for him was unfathomable.” What Kafka could fathom least of all was the *gestus*. Each gesture is an event—one might even say a drama—in itself. The stage on which this drama takes place is the World Theater, which opens up toward heaven. On the other hand, this heaven is only background; to explore it according to its own laws would be like framing the painted backdrop of a stage and hanging it in a picture gallery. Like El Greco, Kafka tears open the sky behind every gesture; but as with El Greco—who was the patron saint of the Expressionists—the gesture remains the decisive thing, the center of the event. In “Der Schlag ans Hoftor” [The Knock at the Gate], the people who hear the knock double up with fright. This is how a Chinese actor would portray terror, but no one would give a start. Elsewhere, K. himself does a bit of acting. Without being fully conscious of it, “slowly, . . . with his eyes not looking down but cautiously raised upward, he took one of the papers from the desk, put it on the palm of his hand, and gradually raised it up to the gentlemen while getting up himself. He had nothing definite in mind, but acted only with the feeling that this was what he would have to do once he had completed the big petition which was to exonerate him completely” [*Der Prozeß*]. This animal gesture combines the utmost mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity. You can read Kafka’s animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not about human beings at all. When you finally come upon the name of the creature—monkey, dog, mole—you look up in fright and realize that you are already far away from the continent of man. But it is always Kafka; he divests human gesture of its traditional supports, and then has a subject for reflection without end.

Strangely enough, these reflections are endless even when their point of departure is one of Kafka’s philosophical tales. Take, for example, the parable “Vor dem Gesetz” [Before the Law]. The reader who read it in *Ein Landarzt* [A Country Doctor] may have been struck by the cloudy spot at its interior. But would it have led him to the never-ending series of reflections traceable to this parable at the spot where Kafka undertakes to interpret it? This is done by the priest in *Der Prozeß*, and at such a significant moment that it looks as if the novel were nothing but the unfolding of the parable. The word “unfolding” has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of “unfolding” is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect is literary. This doesn’t mean that the tradition of Western religious teachings similar to parables, yet they do impose themselves to quotation alive. But do we have the teaching in K.’s postures and the gestures we can say is that here as well have said that these are related, just as well regard them as separate. It is a question of how life’s question increasingly occupies him. If Napoleon, in his *Institut politiques for fate, we* defined organization as the principle hierarchy of officialdom in *Der Prozeß*, it is difficult and inexact. He dealt with in “Beim Bau der Mauer China].

The wall was to be a protective care in the construction, for known ages and peoples, a part of the builders were ignorant for the mental tasks, ignorant and children, whoever offered for the supervision of every trade was required . . . We not really know ourselves high command; then we do book learning nor our complex which we performed in the.

This organization resembles the famous book *La civilisation* and the Great Historical.

The canals of the Yangtze are the result of the skillfully carefulness in the digging of negligence or selfish behavior maintenance of the commerce circumstances, the source of consequently, a life-giving river solidarity among groups of one another; it sentences
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The wall was to be a protection for centuries; accordingly, the most scrupulous care in the construction, the application of the architectural wisdom of all known ages and peoples, and a constant sense of personal responsibility on the part of the builders were indispensable prerequisites for the work. To be sure, for the menial tasks, ignorant day laborers from the populace—men, women, and children, whoever offered his services for good money—could be used. But for the supervision of every four day laborers, a man trained in the building trade was required . . . We—and here I speak in the name of many people—did not really know ourselves until we had carefully scrutinized the decrees of the high command; then we discovered that, without this leadership, neither our book learning nor our common sense would have sufficed for the humble tasks which we performed in the great whole.

This organization resembles fate. Metchnikoff, who has outlined this in his famous book La civilisation et les grands fleuves historiques [Civilization and the Great Historical Rivers], uses language that could be Kafka's:

The canals of the Yangtze and the dams of the Yellow River are in all likelihood the result of the skillfully organized joint labor of . . . generations. The slightest carelessness in the digging of a ditch or the buttressing of a dam, the least bit of negligence or selfish behavior on the part of an individual or a group in the maintenance of the common hydraulic wealth becomes, under such unusual circumstances, the source of social evils and far-reaching social calamity. Consequently, a life-giving river requires on pain of death a close and permanent solidarity among groups of people that frequently are alien or even hostile to one another; it sentences everyone to labors whose common usefulness is
revealed only by time and whose design quite often remains utterly incomprehensible to an ordinary man.  

Kafka wished to be numbered among ordinary men. He was pushed to the limits of understanding at every turn, and he liked to push others to them as well. At times he seems to come close to saying, with Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: "So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have had the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is neither freedom nor love, but the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow—without reflection and even against their conscience." Kafka did not always evade the temptations of a modish mysticism. There is a diary entry concerning his encounter with Rudolf Steiner; in its published form, at least, it does not reflect Kafka's attitude toward him. Did Kafka avoid taking a stand? His way with his own writings certainly does not exclude this possibility. Kafka had a rare capacity for creating parables for himself. Yet his parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings. One has to find one's way in them circumspectly, cautiously, and warily. One must keep in mind Kafka's way of reading, as exemplified in his interpretation of the above-mentioned parable. The text of his will is another case in point. Given its background, the directive in which Kafka ordered the destruction of his literary remains is just as unfathomable, to be weighed just as carefully as the answers of the doorkeeper in "Var dem Gesetz." Perhaps Kafka, whose every day on earth brought him up against insoluble modes of behavior and imprecise communications, in death wished to give his contemporaries a taste of their own medicine.

Kafka's world is a world theater. For him, man is on stage from the very beginning. The proof is the fact that everyone is hired by the Nature Theater of Oklahoma. What the standards for admission are cannot be determined. Dramatic talent, the most obvious criterion, seems to be of no importance. But this can be expressed in another way: all that is expected of the applicants is the ability to play themselves. It is no longer within the realm of possibility that they could, if necessary, be what they claim to be. With their roles, these people look for a position in the Nature Theater the way Pirandello's six characters seek an author. For all of them this place is the last refuge, which does not preclude it from being their salvation. Salvation is not a premium on existence, but the last way out for a man whose path, as Kafka puts it in "Er" [He], is "blocked . . . by his own frontal bone." The law of this theater is contained in a sentence tucked away in "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" [A Report to an Academy]: "I imitated people because I was looking for a way out, and for no other reason." Before the end of his trial, K. seems to have an intimation of these things. He suddenly turns to the two gentlemen who asks them: "What theater corners of his mouth twisted—acted as if he were a murderer following the "Er" with Schmar's "mouth pursing in Brudermord"].—Kafka's Oklahoma. "In Kafka," said So, "there is all the more pertinent his description in "Das nächste Tryes may be within sight, but heard in the distance. Yet having traveled far." Thus he did not found a religion.

Let us consider the village in which K. employed as a land surveyor. It is the village at the foot of the village in which the village in which she lives in it. It is the village in a Th faith. The question why Jews prepare about a princess languishing not understand, far from having traveled far. The fiancée, so says the native village in which she lives or because this is the only way whose language she does not...
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Kafka’s world. For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his own body: the body slips away from him, is hostile toward him. It may happen that a man wakes up one day and finds himself transformed into vermin. Strangeness—his own strangeness—has gained control over him. The air of this village blows about Kafka, and that is why he was not tempted to found a religion. The pigsty which houses the country doctor’s horses; the stuffy back room in which Klamm, a cigar in his mouth, sits over a glass of beer; the manor gate which brings ruin to anyone who knocks on it—all these are part of this village. The air in this village is permeated with all the abortive and overripe elements that form such a putrid mixture. This is the air that Kafka had to breathe throughout his life. He was neither mantic nor the founder of a religion. How was he able to survive in this air?

The Little Hunchback

Some time ago it became known that Knut Hamsun was in the habit of expressing his views in an occasional letter to the editor of the local paper in the small town near which he lived. Years ago, that town was the scene of the jury trial of a young woman who had killed her infant child. She was sentenced to prison. Soon thereafter the local paper printed a letter from Hamsun in which he announced his intention of leaving a town which did not impose the supreme punishment on a mother who killed her newborn child—the gallows, or at least a life term of hard labor. A few years passed. Growth of the Soil appeared, and it contained the story of a young woman who committed the same crime, suffered the same punishment, and, as is made clear to the reader, surely deserved no more severe one.

Kafka’s posthumous reflections, which are contained in Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer, recall this episode to mind. Hardly had this volume appeared when the reflections served as the basis for a body of Kafka criticism which concentrated on an interpretation of these reflections to the neglect of his actual works. There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka’s works. One is to interpret them naturally; the other is to interpret them from a supernatural perspective. Both the psychoanalytic and the theological interpretations miss the essential points. The first kind is represented by Hellmuth Kaiser; the second, by numerous writers, such as H. J. Schoeps, Bernhard Rang, and Bernhard Groethuysen. To these last also belongs Willy Haas, although he has made revealing comments on Kafka in other contexts which we shall discuss later; such insights have not prevented him from interpreting Kafka’s work after a theological pattern. “The powers above, the realm of grace,” Haas writes, “Kafka has depicted in his great novel Das Schloß; the powers below, the realm of the courts and of dam-

nation, he has dealt with between the two, earthly present in strictly stylized and of this interpretation has been criticized. Bernhard Rang may regard the Castle as attempts mean, theological or forced by man willful impede and confound the

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It is easier to draw speculative conclusions from Kafka's posthumous collection of notes than to explore even one of the motifs that appear in his stories and novels. Yet only these give some clue to the prehistoric forces that dominated Kafka's creativeness—forces which, to be sure, may justifiably be regarded as belonging to our world as well. Who can say under what names they appeared to Kafka himself? Only this much is certain: he did not know them and failed to get his bearings among them. In the mirror which the prehistoric world held up to him in the form of guilt, he merely saw the future emerging in the form of judgment. Kafka, however, did not say what it was like. Wasn't it the Last Judgment? Doesn't it turn the judge into the defendant? Isn't the trial the punishment? Kafka gave no answer. Did he expect anything of this punishment? Or wasn't he, rather, concerned to postpone it? In the stories which Kafka left us, narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: its ability to postpone the future. In Der Prozeß, postponement is the hope of the accused man only if the proceedings do not gradually turn into the judgment. The patriarch
Abraham himself could benefit by postponement, even though he may have to trade his place in tradition for it.

I could conceive of another Abraham (to be sure, he would never get to be a patriarch or even an old-clothes dealer), an Abraham who would be prepared to satisfy the demand for a sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter, but would be unable to bring it off, because he cannot get away, being indispensable; the household needs him, there is always something or other to take care of, the house is never ready. But without having his house ready, without having something to fall back on, he cannot leave—this the Bible also realized, for it says: "He set his house in order."22

This Abraham appears "with the promptness of a waiter." Kafka could understand things only in the form of a *gestus*, and this *gestus* which he did not understand constitutes the cloudy part of the parables. Kafka's writings emanate from it. The way he withheld them is well known. His will orders their destruction. This document, which no one interested in Kafka can disregard, says that the writings did not satisfy their author, that he regarded his efforts as failures, that he counted himself among those who were bound to fail. He did fail in his grandiose attempt to convert poetry into teachings, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him the only appropriate thing for it. No other writer has obeyed the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image" so faithfully.

"It was as if the shame of it were to outlive him." With these words *Der Prozeß* ends. Shame—corresponding as it does to his "elemental purity of feeling"23—is Kafka's strongest gesture. It has a dual aspect, however. Shame is an intimate human reaction, but at the same time it has social claims. Shame is not only shame in the presence of others, but can also be shame one feels for others. Kafka's shame, then, is no more personal than the life and thought which govern it and which he has described thus: "He does not live for the sake of his own life; he does not think for the sake of his own thought. He feels as though he were living and thinking under the constraint of a family... Because of this unknown family, he cannot be released" ["Er"]. We do not know the makeup of this unknown family, which is composed of human beings and animals. But this much is clear: it is this family that forces Kafka to move cosmic ages in his writings. Doing this family's bidding, he moves the mass of historical happenings the way Sisyphus rolled the stone. As he does so, its nether side comes to light; it is not a pleasant sight, but Kafka is capable of bearing it. "To believe in progress is not to believe that progress has already taken place. That would be no belief."24 Kafka did not consider the age in which he lived as an advance over the beginnings of time. His novels are set in a swamp world. In his works, the creature appears at the stage which Bachofen has termed

the hetaeric stage.25 The fact that it does not extend in virtue of this very oblivion a seasickness on dry land, ["Kinder auf der Landstrasse",] not tire of expressing him gives way and mingles with begins "Der Schlag ans..."

"Fine times," the life; "You never asked me back to the dark, deep wor... voluptuousness," to quote only light and which justi... [dirty voluptuousness].27

Only from this vantage point be comprehended. Where K., no matter how important and with the implication that being subtly invited to recall how Willy Haas has inter... is forgetting, whose... Here it has actually become a figure of the most striki... "this mysterious center..." plays a very mysterious ro... . . . the most profound ro... retains, an infallible memo... generation.' The most sac... from the book of memory.

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25. The fact that this stage is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is present by virtue of this very oblivion. An experience deeper than that of the average person can make contact with it. "I have experience [Erfahrung]," we read in one of Kafka's earliest notes, "and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land."26 It is no accident that the first "Meditation" ["Kinder auf der Landstrasse"] was conceived on a swing. And Kafka does not tire of expressing himself on the fluctuating nature of experiences. Each gives way and mingles with its opposite. "It was summer, a hot day": so begins "Der Schlag ans Hoftor." "Walking home with my sister, I was passing the gate of a great house. I don't remember whether she knocked on the gate out of mischief or in a fit of absentmindedness, or merely shook her fist at it and did not knock at all." The very possibility of the third alternative puts the other two, which at first seemed harmless, in a different light. It is from the swampy soil of such experiences that Kafka's female characters rise. They are swamp creatures—like Leni, "who stretches out the middle and ring fingers of her right hand, between which the connecting web of skin reached almost to the top joint, short as the fingers were" [Der Prozeß]. "Fine times," the ambiguous Frieda reminisces about her earlier life; "You never asked me about my past" [Das Schloß]. This past takes us back to the dark, deep womb, the scene of the mating "whose untrammeled voluptuousness," to quote Bachofen, "is hateful to the pure forces of heavenly light and which justifies the term used by Arnobius, luteae voluptates [dirty voluptuousness]."27

Only from this vantage point can the technique of Kafka the storyteller be comprehended. Whenever figures in the novels have anything to say to K., no matter how important or surprising it may be, they do so casually and with the implication that he must really have known it all along. It is as though nothing new were being imparted, as though the hero were just being subtly invited to recall to mind something he had forgotten. This is how Willy Haas has interpreted the course of events in Der Prozeß, and justifiably so: "The object of the trial—indeed, the real hero of this incredible book—is forgetting, whose main characteristic is the forgetting of itself . . . Here it has actually become a mute figure in the shape of the accused man, a figure of the most striking intensity." It probably cannot be denied that "this mysterious center . . . derives from the Jewish religion." "Memory plays a very mysterious role as piousness. It is not an ordinary quality but . . . the most profound quality of Jehovah that He remembers, that He retains, an infallible memory 'to the third and fourth, even to the hundredth, generation.' The most sacred . . . act of the . . . ritual is the erasing of sins from the book of memory."28

What has been forgotten—and with this insight we stand before another threshold of Kafka's work—is never something purely individual. Every-
thing forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless uncertain and changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka’s stories presses toward the light. “Here the very fullness of the world is considered the only reality. All spirit must be concrete, particularized, in order to have its place and raison d’être. The spiritual, if it plays a role at all, turns into spirits. These spirits become definite individuals, with names and a very special connection with the name of the worshiper. . . . Unhesitatingly, the fullness of the world is filled to overflowing with their fullness. . . . Unconcernedly, the crowd of spirits is swelled. . . . New ones are constantly added to the old ones, and each is distinguished from the others by its own name.” All this refers not to Kafka, but to—China. This is how Franz Rosenzweig describes the Chinese ancestor cult in his book Der Stern der Erlösung.29 To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable as the world of realities was important, and we may be sure that, like the totem poles of primitive peoples, the world of ancestors took him down to the animals. Incidentally, Kafka is not the only writer for whom animals are the receptacles of the forgotten. In Tieck’s profound story Der blonde Eckbert [Fair Eckbert],30 the forgotten name of a little dog, Strohmi, stands for a mysterious guilt. One can understand, then, why Kafka never tired of hearing about the forgotten from animals. They are not the goal, to be sure, but one cannot do without them. A case in point is the hunger artist, who, “strictly speaking, was only an impediment on the way to the menagerie” [“Ein Hungerkünstler”]. Can’t one see the animal in Der Bau [The Burrow] or the giant mole [“Der Riesenmaulwurf”] ponder as they dig in? Yet this thinking is extremely flighty. Irresolutely, it flits from one worry to the next; it nibbles at every anxiety with the fickleness of despair. Thus, there are butterflies in Kafka, too. The guilt-ridden hunter Gracchus, who refuses to acknowledge his guilt, “has turned into a butterfly” [“Der Jäger Gracchus”]. “Don’t laugh,” says the hunter Gracchus. This much is certain: of all of Kafka’s creatures, the animals have the greatest opportunity for reflection. What corruption is in the law, anxiety is in their thinking. It messes a situation up, yet it is the only hopeful thing about it. But because the most forgotten source of strangeness is our body—one’s own body—one can understand why Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him “the animal.” It was the vanguard of the great herd.

In Kafka’s work, the most singular bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt is Odradek [“Die Sorge des Hausvaters”]. “At first sight it looks like a flat, star-shaped spool for thread, and it really seems to have thread wound around it; to be sure, this is probably just old, broken-off bits of thread that are knotted and tangled together, of all sorts and colors. But the object is not just a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and at the very end of the crossbar there is a sort of flat ring, which engraves letters on a piece of paper if it is lightly run over it. . . . I believe is an aid to falling asleep, the way a pillow is. . . .” This little ring with the coming of the M radiates its power and releases its energy. In my little bed to make, A little hunchback is in the hall. With laughter he does sit, like the rustling of falling
rgotten of the prehistoric compounds, yielding a container from which stories press toward the crowded and the only reality. All have its place and raison d’être. These spirits have a very special connection with the fullness of the world. Incidentally, the crowd of totem poles of primitive omen is the receptacle of the spirits. These spirits are the totem poles of primitive animals. Incidentally, the world of realities was added to the old ones, and name.” All this refers not Rosenzweig describes the Erlösung. To Kafka, the world of realities was totem poles of primitive to the animals. Incidentally, are the receptacles of the Echbert [Fair Eckbert], 30 names for a mysterious guilt. ed of hearing about the to be sure, but one cannot artist, who, “strictly speak-to the menagerie” [“Ein Der Bau [The Burrow] or r as they dig in? Yet this from one worry to the next; of despair. Thus, there are Gracchus, who refuses to y” (“Der Jäger Gracchus”). much is certain: of all of opportunity for reflection. their thinking. It messes a ut it. But because the most one’s own body—one can pted from within him “the which the prehistoric world des Hausvaters”). “At first read, and it really seems to 1bly just old, broken-off her, of all sorts and colors. eden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to it at right angles. With the aid of this latter rod on one side and one of the extensions of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.” Odraidek stays alternately in the attic, on the staircase, in the corridors, and in the hall.” So it prefers the same places as the court of law which investigates guilt. Attics are the places of discarded, forgotten objects. Perhaps having to appear before a court of justice gives rise to a feeling similar to that with which one approaches trunks in the attic which have been locked up for years. One would like to put off this chore till the end of time, just as K. regards his written defense as suitable “for occupying one’s senile mind someday during retirement.”

Odradek is the form which things assume in oblivion. They are distorted. The “cares of a family man,” which no one can identify, are distorted; the bug, which we know all too well represents Gregor Samsa, is distorted; the big animal, half-lamb, half-kitten, for which “the butcher’s knife” might be “a release,” is distorted. These Kafka figures are connected by a long series of figures with the prototype of distortion: a hunched back. Among the images in Kafka’s stories, none is more frequent than that of the man who bows his head far down on his chest: the fatigue of the court officials, the noise affecting the doormen in the hotel, the low ceiling facing the visitors in the gallery. In the penal colony, those in power use an archaic apparatus which engraves letters with curlicues on the back of every guilty man, multiplying the stabs and piling up the ornaments to the point where the back of the guilty man becomes clairvoyant and is able to decipher the script from which he must derive the nature of his unknown guilt. It is the back on which this is incumbent. It was always this way with Kafka. Compare this early diary entry: “In order to make myself as heavy as possible, which I believe is an aid to falling asleep, I had crossed my arms and put my hands on my shoulders, so that I lay there like a soldier with his pack.”31 Quite palpably, being loaded down is here equated with forgetting—the forgetting of a sleeping man. The same symbol occurs in the folksong “The Little Hunchback.” This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment in it.

When I come into my room,
My little bed to make,
A little hunchback is in there,
With laughter he does shake.

This is the laughter of Odradek, which is described as sounding “something like the rustling of falling leaves.”
When I kneel upon my stool
And I want to pray,
A hunchbacked man is in the room
And he starts to say:
My dear child, I beg of you,
Pray for the little hunchback too.\(^{32}\)

So ends the folksong. In his depths, Kafka touches ground which neither “mythical divination” nor “existential theology” supplied him with. It is the ground of folk tradition, German as well as Jewish. Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed in the highest degree what Malebranche called “the natural prayer of the soul”: attentiveness.\(^{33}\) And in this attentiveness he included all creatures, as saints include them in their prayers.

Sancho Panza

In a Hasidic village, so the story goes, Jews were sitting together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening. They were all local people, with the exception of one person no one knew, a very poor, ragged man who was squatting in a dark corner at the back of the room. All sorts of things were discussed, and then it was suggested that everyone should tell what wish he would make if one were granted him. One man wanted money; another wished for a son-in-law; a third dreamed of a new carpenter’s bench; and so each spoke in turn. After they had finished, only the beggar in his dark corner was left. Reluctantly and hesitantly he answered the question. “I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, some night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate to my castle and meet with no resistance. Roused from my sleep, I wouldn’t have time even to dress and I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner. This is my wish.” The others exchanged uncomprehending glances. “And what good would this wish have done you?” someone asked. “I’d have a shirt,” was the answer.\(^{34}\)

This story takes us deep into the household that is Kafka’s world. No one says that the distortions which it will be the Messiah’s mission to set right someday affect only our space; surely they are distortions of our time as well. Kafka must certainly have thought this. And in this certainty he made the grandfather in “Das nächste Dorf” say: “Life is astonishingly short. As I look back over it, life seems so foreshortened to me that I can hardly understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that, quite apart from accidents, even the span of a normal life that passes happily may be totally insufficient for such a ride.” This old man’s “normal” life that “passes happily” but who is exempted from the flight which he attains in its fulfillment.

Among Kafka’s creations of life in a peculiar way, it was said: ‘People live there. ‘Because they don’t get tired’? ‘Don’t fools get tired?’ [Landstrasse].’ One can imagine assistants. But there is no need to look for assistants’ faces that the grandfather in “Das Schloß” places in Kafka’s works and say, “When do you sleep?” “Don’t you sleep!” said the student. “And what good would that have done you?” “I’d have a shirt.” This reminds one of the story of Sancho Panza.

In a Hasidic village, Jews were sitting together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening. They were all local people, with the exception of one person no one knew, a very poor, ragged man who was squatting in a dark corner at the back of the room. All sorts of things were discussed, and then it was suggested that everyone should tell what wish he would make if one were granted him. One man wanted money; another wished for a son-in-law; a third dreamed of a new carpenter’s bench; and so each spoke in turn. After they had finished, only the beggar in his dark corner was left. Reluctantly and hesitantly he answered the question. “I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, some night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate to my castle and meet with no resistance. Roused from my sleep, I wouldn’t have time even to dress and I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner. This is my wish.” The others exchanged uncomprehending glances. “And what good would this wish have done you?” someone asked. “I’d have a shirt,” was the answer.\(^{34}\)

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ground which neither supplied him with. It is Jewish. Even if Kafka did confess in the highest degree the soul": attentiveness.

Among Kafka’s creations, there is a clan which reckons with the brevity of life in a peculiar way. It comes from the “city in the south . . . of which it was said: ‘People live there who—imagine!—don’t sleep!’ ‘And why not?’ ‘Because they don’t get tired.’ ‘Why don’t they?’ ‘Because they are fools.’ ‘Don’t fools get tired?’ ‘How could fools get tired?’” [“Kinder auf der Landstrasse”]. One can see that the fools are akin to the indefatigable assistants. But there is more to this clan. It is casually remarked of the assistants’ faces that they seem to be those of “grown-ups, perhaps even students” [Das Schloß]. Actually, the students who appear in the strangest places in Kafka’s works are the spokesmen for and leaders of this clan. “But when do you sleep?” asked Karl, looking at the student in surprise. ‘Oh, sleep!’ said the student. ‘I’ll get some sleep when I’m finished with my studies.” This reminds one of the reluctance with which children go to bed; after all, while they are asleep, something might happen that concerns them. “Don’t forget the best!” We are familiar with this remark “from a nebulous bunch of old stories, although it may not occur in any of them.” But forgetting always involves the best, for it involves the possibility of redemption. “The idea of helping me is an illness and requires bed rest for a cure,” ironically says the restlessly wandering ghost of the hunter Gracchus.—While they study, the students are awake, and perhaps their being kept awake is the best thing about their studies. The hunger artist fasts, the doorkeeper is silent, and the students are awake. This is the veiled way in which the great rules of asceticism operate in Kafka.

The crowning achievement of asceticism is study. Reverently Kafka unearths it from long-lost boyhood. “In a way not very different from this—a long time ago—Karl had sat at home at his parents’ table doing his homework, while his father read the newspaper or did bookkeeping and correspondence for some organization and his mother was busy sewing, drawing the thread high out of the fabric in her hand. To avoid disturbing his father, Karl would put only his exercise book and his writing materials on the table, while he arranged the books he needed on chairs to the right and left of him. How quiet it had been there! How seldom strangers had entered that room!” [Amerika]. Perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes it possible for a something to be useful—that is, they are very close to the Tao. This is what Kafka was after with his desire “to hammer a table together with painstaking craftsmanship and, at the same time, to do nothing—not in such a way that someone could say ‘Hammering is nothing to him,’ but To him, hammering
is real hammering and at the same time nothing,' which would have made
the hammering even bolder, more determined, more real, and, if you like,
more insane" ["Er"]. This is the resolute, fanatical mien which students have
when they study; it is the strangest mien imaginable. The scribes, the
students, are out of breath; they fairly race along. "Often the official dictates
in such a low voice that the scribe cannot even hear it sitting down; he has
to jump up, catch the dictated words, quickly sit again and write them down,
then jump up again, and so forth. How strange that is! It is almost incom­
prehensible!" [Das Schloß]. It may be easier to understand this if one thinks
of the actors in the Nature Theater. Actors have to catch their cues in a
flash, and they resemble those assiduous students in other ways as well.
Truly, for them "hammering is real hammering and at the same time noth­
ing"—provided that this is part of their role. They study this role, and only
a bad actor would forget a word or a gesture from it. For the members of
the Oklahoma troupe, however, the role is their earlier life; hence the
"nature" in this Nature Theater. Its actors have been redeemed. But this is
not true of the student whom Karl watches silently at night on the balcony
as the student reads his book, "turning the pages, occasionally looking
something up in another book which he always snatched up quick as a flash,
and frequently making notes in a notebook, which he always did with his
gesture[s] presented in this fashion;
but he invariably does so with astonishment. K. has rightly been compared
with the Good Soldier Schweik: the one is astonished at everything; the
other, at nothing.16 The invention of motion pictures and the phonograph
came in an age of maximum alienation of men from one another, of
unpredictably intervening relationships which have become their only ones.
Experiments have proved that a man does not recognize his own gait on
film or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in
such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what leads him to study, where
he may encounter fragments of his own existence—fragments that are still
within the context of the role. He might catch hold of the lost gestus the
way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold.37 He might
understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required! It is
a tempest that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against
it. Thus, the beggar on the corner bench rides toward his past in order to
catch hold of himself in the figure of the fleeing king. This ride, which is
long enough for a life, corresponds to life, which is too short for a ride—
"until one shed one's spurs (for there were no spurs), threw away the reins
(for there were no reins), and barely saw the land before one as a smoothly
mown plain, with the horse's neck and head already gone." This is the
fulfillment of the fantasy about the blessed horseman who rushes toward
the past on an untrammled, happy journey, no longer a burden on his
galloping horse. But accursed is the rider who is chained to his nag because
he has set himself a futurist cellar—accursed is his anachronistic
"Seated on the bucket, mowing the sticks of their drivers
vista than that of "the real world" drops out of sight forever;
the wind that is favorable to the prehistoric wog
boat of the hunter Grasad, well as barbarians," write
primary essences and two
and straight ahead, where
Reversal is the direction of the teacher is Bucephalus, "the
powerful Alexander—
His flanks free and unhitched
lamp far from the din of our old books."—Werner
After giving careful attention
there else in literature is
myth in its full scope.*39
"justice," yet it is justice
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The gate to justice is
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support them on their "true
have found the law of his
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presumably sought all his
is his most perfect creation.

Without ever boasting of
plying a lot of romances
which would have made it more real, and, if you like, more thinkable. The scribes, the
officials, the dictators. Often the official dictates while he sits; he has
the text, and they write down, or rather re-formulate, what he says.
It is almost incomprehensible to imagine this if one thinks about it: to catch their cues in a
situation in which the scribes, the officials, the dictators are at the same time not
study this role, and only fulfill it. For the members of Kafka's
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redeemed. But this is
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Bucephalus, "the new advocate," who takes the road back without
the powerful Alexander—which means, rid of the onrushing conqueror.
"His flanks free and unhampered by the thighs of a rider, under a quiet
lamp far from the din of Alexander's battles, he reads and turns the pages
of our old books." —Werner Kraft once wrote an interpretation of this story.

After giving careful attention to every detail of the text, Kraft notes: "No­
where else in literature is there such a powerful and penetrating criticism of
myth in its full scope." According to Kraft, Kafka does not use the word
"justice," yet it is justice which serves as the point of departure for his
 critique of myth.—But once we have reached this point, we are in danger
of missing Kafka by stopping here. Is it really the law which could thus be
invoked against myth in the name of justice? No, as a legal scholar
Bucephalus remains true to his origins, except that he does not seem to be
practicing law—and this is probably something new, in Kafka's sense, for
both Bucephalus and the bar. The law which is studied but no longer
practiced is the gate to justice.

The gate to justice is study. Yet Kafka doesn't dare attach to this study
the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah. His
assistants are sextons who have lost their house of prayer; his students are
pupils who have lost the Holy Writ (Schrift). Now there is nothing to
support them on their "untrammeled, happy journey.""40 Kafka, however,
has found the law of his journey: on at least one occasion, he succeeded in
bringing its breathtaking speed in line with the slow narrative pace that he
presumably sought all his life. He expressed this in a little prose piece which
is his most perfect creation—and not only because it is an interpretation.

Without ever boasting of it, Sancho Panza succeeded over the years, by sup­
hours, in so diverting from him his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that his demon thereupon freely performed the maddest exploits—which, however, lacking a preordained object, which Sancho Panza himself was supposed to have been, did no one any harm. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and thus enjoyed great and profitable entertainment to the end of his days.” (“Die Wahrheit über Sancho Pansa”)

Sancho Panza, a sedate fool and a clumsy assistant, sent his rider on ahead; Bucephalus outlived his. Whether it is a man or a horse is no longer so important, if only the burden is taken off the back.


Notes

1. Grigori Potemkin (1739-1791) was a Russian soldier and statesman who became the chief favorite of Catherine II. The immediate source of Benjamin’s story is Aleksandr Pushkin, *Anecdotes and Tabletalk*, no. 24.


4. Hermann Cohen, *Ethis der reinen Willens* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1907), p. 362. Cohen (1842–1918) did important work that combined philosophy (he was the cofounder of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism and published books on ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics) and Jewish theology. His work figures prominently in Benjamin’s essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (see Volume 1 of this edition).


6. For the Cat Lamb, Odradek, and Gregor Samsa, see the stories “Eine Kreuzung” (A Crossbreed), “Die Sorge des Hausvaters” (The Cares of a Family Man), and “Die Verwandlung” (The Metamorphosis), respectively.

7. Robert Walser (1878-1956), Swiss prose writer, was much cherished by Benjamin (as well as by Kafka and Robert Musil) for his literary miniatures, which mix keen observation of detail with wit, irony, and a sense of paradox.


11. See Kafka, *Tagebücher* entry for March 26, 1921, the notion that there is the exerted a remarkable i the twentieth century.

12. Conversation with Ben

13. Lao-tze (fl. sixth century BCE) was the alleged author of the *Tao Te Ching*, a text that the text was written on the development of

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15. Knut Hamsun (pseudonym for Olav, 1861-1952) is a Norwegian novelist and essayist, known primarily as Kafka’s friend and as the editor of his major works, most of which were published after Kafka’s death. Brod had a major influence on the first wave of Kafka interpretations, many of which were religiously oriented.

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II, 409-438.

source of Benjamin's story is
in Kafka's novel Das Schloß
11. See Kafka, Tagebücher, 1910-1923 (New York: Schocken, 1951), pp. 54-58: entry for March 26, 1911. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian-born
scientist and editor, and the founder of anthroposophy, a movement based on the notion that there is a spiritual world comprehensible to pure thought but accessible only to the highest faculties of mental knowledge. Steiner's ideas exerted a remarkable influence on educational philosophy in the early years of the twentieth century.

12. Conversation with Benjamin (ms. 334 in the Benjamin archive).

13. Lao-tze (fl. sixth century B.C.) was the first philosopher of Chinese Taoism and the alleged author of the Tao-te Ching. Modern scholars discount the possibility that the text was written by one person but acknowledge the influence of Taoism on the development of Buddhism.

14. Brod's remark is not in the postscript to Das Schloß, but was recorded by Willy Haas in Gestalten der Zeit (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1930), pp. 183ff.

15. Knut Hamsun (pseudonym of Knut Pedersen; 1859-1952) was a Norwegian writer. Growth of the Soil appeared in 1917.

16. Hans Joachim Schoeps (1901-1980) was a German historian who published widely on Jewish religious history. Bernhard Groethuysen (1880-1946), German cultural historian, was a student of Wilhelm Dilthey and applied Dilthey's method of "intellectual history" to studies of the intellectual development of the European bourgeoisie.

17. Haas, Gestalten der Zeit, p. 175. Willy Haas (1891-1973), German critic and essayist, founded (along with Ernst Rowohlト) the weekly journal Die literarische Welt, which he edited until 1933 and in which he published numerous pieces by his friend Benjamin.


20. Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34-1109) was the founder of Scholasticism, the school of thought that dominated the Middle Ages. Anselm first proposed the ontological argument for the existence of God. His satisfaction theory of redemption was based on the feudal notion of making satisfaction or recompense according to the status of the person against whom the offense had been committed. According to Anselm's notion, God was the offended party and man the offender.


25. Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887) was a Swiss anthropologist and jurist, best-known as the author of *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) and *Urreligion und antike Symbole* (1861). See Benjamin’s review of Bernoulli’s book on Bachofen, in Volume 1 of this edition.


30. Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853) was a German Romantic writer, critic, and translator. His novella *Der blonde Eckbert* appeared in 1797.


33. Nicolas de Malebranche (1638–1715) was a French metaphysician whose work sought a synthesis of Cartesianism, Neoplatonism, and the thought of Augustine.

34. This joke was current in books of Jewish humor around 1900.


37. In the 1814 prose tale *Peter Schlemihl*, by the German Romantic writer Adalbert von Chamisso, a man sells his shadow to the Devil for an inexhaustible purse of gold, but then regrets the bargain.

