Because they made up the last volume of the Complete Works when they were published in the German edition (in 1958), the Letters seemed to constitute Kafka's last word. We were prepared to expect from these ultimate writings the final revelation that, as on the day of the Last Judgment, would give form to the enigma. Whence our naively anxious reading, childishly disappointed. This is because there is no Last Judgment, no more than there is an end. The strange nature of posthumous publications is to be inexhaustible.

Although the war, the persecutions, the changes in regime have made a void around him, destroying witnesses and testimonies, there will certainly be, and will hardly cease to be, many documents, perhaps important ones, perhaps insignificant ones. Inquiries have been made about his childhood and his adolescence, the results of which have begun to be collected. In a certain way, the biography remains to be written. Until now, what we know is the face and the life as Max Brod knew them; and this knowledge is irreplaceable. The letters only confirm this to us: to no other was he so close, with such a lasting trust— I will not say through an impulse of his nature. "Max and I [are] radically different." But it is this difference that makes their friendship a strong and virile understanding; even if Kafka admires Brod for his power of life, his ability to act, his force as a writer, if Kafka thus puts Brod far above himself, he never humbles himself before him and in relation to him, with the passion for self-abasement that he displays with others. But precisely he was other with others, and with himself, what was he? It is this invisible self that, in staying hidden from us, remains the object of our naive curiosity and our search, necessarily disappointed.

The letters cover twenty years of his life. If they reveal to us less than we had hoped, there are several grounds for this. First of all, they were already partially known, because Brod used them in his biography and his other books. Furthermore, they remain very fragmentary, such publications being always painfully subject to the chance that preserves and destroys without reason. Thus we have almost nothing of the letters exchanged with his family. From his adolescence a little of the passionate correspondence was saved: with his fellow student, Oskar Pollak, and then slightly later with a young lady, Hedwige W., encountered during a stay in Moravia in 1907, the early stages of his tormented relations with the feminine world. Later, the essential part is made up of the letters to Brod, F. Weltsch, O. Baum, the friends of a lifetime (almost nothing of the letters to Werfel); still later, to R. Klopstock, the young medical student, who, with Dora Diamant, was present at his end. As chance would have it, the sparsest years of the Diary are the richest in important letters: we now have a more precise account of the stay in Žižkov when the tuberculosis declared itself, of the stays in Matclic, in Plana, and the years 1921, 1922, when he writes, then abandons The Castle; certain allusions become clearer, certain obscurities deepen; we feel ourselves confirmed in the mysterious nature of certain moments. We have a better sense of the curve of this rare existence; the negative side of the revelation is more perceptible to us.

Nothing, however, that by force of the unexpected could be compared with the letters to Milena. Also nothing that gives us the feeling of being close to crossing the threshold, as it happens in the Diary. This is because, as close as he is to his correspondents, revealing to them what is most secret to him, speaking of himself with ruthless candor, he maintains an insensible distance intended to spare both their truth and his own. "You must not say that you
understand me," he repeats to Brod. His friends are always ready, convinced of his admirable personality, to represent to him all the reasons he has not to despair. But it is precisely in this that they drive him to despair: not that he should be happy only with complete unhappiness, but because any interpretation that is too favorable by those who know him the best, by showing the inaccessible nature of the illness (unhappiness and pain) that is specific to him, also shows the depth of this sickness and the poor worth of the solutions with which one soothes him. "What you say about my case is right; from the outside, it presents itself thus; it is a consolation, but, when the moment comes, also a despair; for it shows that nothing of these dreadful things shows through and that everything lies hidden in me. This obscurity that I alone see, and I myself do not always see it; already the day after that particular day I could no longer see it. But I know it is there and that it waits for me."

One must add that Kafka always had an extreme respect for the truth of others; he keeps them at as much of a distance as possible from the dark experience in which he finds himself and, in the advice he gives them, in the judgments he forms about them, just as in the radiance of his light gaiety, persuades them of an opening onto hope, which he immediately impugns as soon as anyone wants to make him participate in it. In a late letter to Klopstock (July 1922), I find these lines: "If we were on the right path, to renounce would be a despair without limits, but because we are on a path that only leads us to a second, and the latter to a third, and so forth; because the true way will not come forth for a very long time, and perhaps never; because, therefore, we are completely given over to uncertainty, but also to an inconceivably beautiful diversity, the fulfillment of hopes... remains the always unexpected miracle, yet always possible on the other hand." Here we have, rarely described by Kafka, the positive aspect of a search that appears only negative (because the true way, which is unique, is not given to us; there is not one path but an infinite number, and we have something that is infinitely varied and scintillating, the incomparably beautiful scintillation of reflections, which brings us an aesthetic joy); however, I doubt he would have accepted to have this consolation, which he shares with his discouraged friend, applied to himself. Another example. Brod always called attention to this aphorism as the center of Kafka's faith: "Theoretically, there is a perfect possibility of earthly happiness: to believe in the indestructible in itself without striving to reach it." But we see, in a letter, that this thought refers to one of Max Brod's essays (Paganism, Christianity, Judaism): "Perhaps one would come closest to your conception were one to say: 'There is theoretically a perfect possibility of earthly happiness: to believe in what is decidedly divine without striving to reach it.' This possibility of happiness is as impious as it is inaccessible, but the Greeks perhaps came closer to it than anyone else." Would this then be Kafka's truth, a truth proper to the Greeks? And what is more, a "blasphemy"? This commentary would suffice to recall us to a prudence, which the generous optimism of Brod sometimes made him forget.

Kafka's life was an obscure fight, protected by obscurity, but we clearly see its four aspects, represented by his relation with his father, with literature, with the feminine world, and these three forms of struggle can be retranslated more profoundly to give form to the spiritual fight. Naturally, with each of these relations, all the others are called into question. The crisis is always total. Each episode says everything and withholds everything. The concern of his body is the concern of his entire being. The insomnia, this dramatic difficulty of each of his nights, expresses all of his difficulties. The only interest in constructing his biography around these four more or less hidden centers would be, therefore, to make us perceive it momentarily according to the greater or lesser insight that we have into each of these enigmas, the quality of which is very different. We would observe, for example, that the problem of the father with which he is occupied in such an obvious manner, and although it develops along with the three others (we notice immediately how he complicates the problem of his marriage to an extreme, how he forms one of the obsessive themes of his writings,
how finally he finds himself implicated in all of the questions of Judaism), is probably the least burdened with secrets and the one that accompanies him the least far. The most far-reaching is the problem of the writer. The most dramatic, the one that provokes him at his darkest moments is that of feminine relationships. The most obscure, that of the spiritual world, necessarily hidden, because it is shielded from any direct grasp: "I cannot speak of the essential; it is, even for me, enclosed within the obscurity of my breast: there it lies next to the illness, on the same common bed."

The letters bring us, if not insights, at least the possibility of a more prudent and more nuanced understanding of each of these forms of himself. Above all, we have a better sense of the movement of this entire life, a life that, although it is rooted from youth in extreme affirmations from which he no longer seems to depart, will not cease to transform itself. It is this movement in the immobile that makes it rich and enigmatic. The words of adolescence, those of maturity may appear superimposed on one another; they are the same, they are very different, and yet not different, but somehow the echo of themselves at more or less profound levels of agreement; and at the same time, the becoming is not purely internal; history is important, a history that, on the one hand, is his personal history, his encounter with Felice Bauer, Julie Wohryzek, Milena, Dora Diamant, with his family, with the countryside at Zähringen. On his deathbed, deprived of strength, voice, breath, he is still correcting the proofs of one of his books (The Hunger Artist). Because he cannot speak, he notes on a piece of paper for the benefit of his companions: "Now I am going to read them. This will perhaps agitate me too much; yet I must live it one more time." And Klopstock reports that when the reading was finished, tears rolled down his face for a long time. "It was the first time that I saw Kafka, always so master of himself, let himself be overcome by such a movement of emotion." The only severe and almost fierce letter that finds its place in the collection he wrote to protect his solitude as a writer. I will quote it in order to show that in spite of his wonderful attentiveness to others, there is a limit that he cannot allow to be crossed. Klopstock, the young medical student whose acquaintance he had made in Matliary and whom he likes, moreover, almost with tenderness, seemed to have desired a more intimate friendship, wanted to see him more often, found that he had changed since the first days of their encounter: "I will concede that between Matliary and Prague there is a difference. During that time, after being tormented by periods of madness, I began to write, and this activity, in a manner that makes it very cruel for all of the people around me (unspeakably cruel, I will not say more), is for me the most important thing on earth, as his delirium can be for the one who is mad (were he to lose it, he would go mad') or pregnancy for a woman. This has nothing to do with the value of the writing. I know its value all too well, but rather with the value it has for me. And this is why, in a trembling of anguish, I protect writing from anything that might disturb it, and not only writing but the solitude that belongs to it. And when I told you yesterday that you should not come Sunday night, but only Monday and when twice you asked: 'So, not in the evening?' and I had to answer you, at least the second time: 'Get some rest,' this was a perfect lie, for my only aim was to be alone."

On the central problem of the necessity of writing, which is both a fatality and a threat, we find in the Letters two of the most important texts. They are dated July and September 1922. Important in themselves, they are also important because they reveal to us the circumstances in which The Castle was abandoned. I will partly summarize and partly quote these texts, which are rather long. I will begin with the more recent: "I have been here [in Plana] for a week once again; I did not spend it gaily, for I had to abandon, manifestly for ever, the story of the Castle; the latter could not be
taken up again because of the ‘collapse’ that began a week before the trip to Prague, although what I have written in Plana is not as bad as what you know.” Kafka tells how his sister Ottla (who lived with him) was soon obliged to return to Prague for good and how the servant had offered to prepare his meals for him so that he might continue his stay in a place he liked so much. He accepts, everything is decided: “I will stay the winter, I am still thankful.”

Immediately, I was barely at the top of the stairs leading to my room when the ‘collapse’ occurred... I need not describe the external side of such a state, you are also familiar with it, but you must think of what is most extreme in your experience... Above all, I know that I will not be able to sleep. The force of sleep has been gnawed away to its very center. I already anticipate insomnia, I suffer as if last night had already been without sleep. I go out, I cannot think of anything else, nothing occupies me but a monstrous anguish and, at clearer moments, the anguish of this anguish... What can this be? As far as I am able to penetrate it with thought, there is only one thing. You say that I must meet with bigger subjects. This is right... but I also find myself cried by my mouse hole. And this one thing is: fear of complete solitude. Were I to remain here alone, I would be fully solitary. I would not be able to speak to people, and were I to do it, the solitude would only be increased. And I know, at least in an approximate way, the frights of solitude—not so much of solitary solitude but of the solitude among men, the first times in Matlavy or a few days in Spindlermühle, but I do not want to speak of this. How is it with solitude? Solitude is my one goal, my greatest temptation, my possibility, and, admitting that one could say that I have ‘organized’ my life, then it has been organized in order that solitude be at home in it. And, in spite of this, anguish before what I love so much.”

This desire, which is anguish—anguish before solitude when it is there, anguish when it is not there, anguish again before any compromise solution—this, it seems, is what we understand well, but let us not be in a hurry to understand. In a slightly earlier letter, Kafka clarifies, but in a more enigmatic way, the entanglement of all of these relations. Once again it is a matter of a serious crisis. He was supposed to go to Georgental to stay with his friend Baum. He had just written to him to say that he accepted. Everything pleased him about his trip, or at least he did not see any reasonable objection to it. And yet “the collapse,” the infinite anguish, the night without sleep. “While these thoughts were coming and going between my pained temples during this night without sleep, I was again conscious of what I had almost forgotten in the past rather peaceful days: the weak or even inexistent ground upon which I live, above the darkness from which the tenebrous power emerges at its whim, a power that, without regard for my stuttering, destroys my life. Writing sustains me, but would it not be more correct to say that writing maintains this sort of life? Naturally I do not wish to claim that my life is better when I am not writing. It is much worse, altogether unbearable, and can only lead to madness. And yet, it is true, it is incumbent on me even if, as is the case at the moment, I am not writing, to be a writer nonetheless, and a writer who does not write is all the same a monstrosity that calls forth madness. But what is it, then, about this, being a writer? Writing is a charming and wonderful reward, but who is paying us for what? At night, with the clarity of a child’s lessons, I saw distinctly that it was a demon. This descent into the dark powers, this unleashing of spirits normally under control, these dubious embraces and everything that can happen down there, about which one remembers nothing when one writes stories in the light of the sun. Perhaps there is another way of writing, I know only this one; in the night, when the anguish does not let me sleep, I know only this one. And what is diabolical in it seems very clear to me. It is vanity and concupiscence that ceaselessly circle around my person or around an unknown person and derive pleasure from it, in a movement that only multiplies itself, a real solar system of vanity. The wish of the naive man: ‘I would like to die and see how I will be mourned,’ such a writer constantly accomplishes it, he dies (or he does not live) and constantly mourns...
himself. Whence his terrible anguish before death, which does not necessarily express itself as the fear of dying, but also manifests itself in the fear of change, fear of going to Georgental."

But why this fear of dying? Kafka distinguishes two series of reasons that, he says, may perhaps become confused. And, in effect, they seem to come down to this thought: the writer is afraid of dying because he has not yet lived, and not only because he has missed out on the happiness of living with a woman, children, fortune, but because, instead of entering the house, he must be content with admiring it from the outside and crowning its rooftop, excluded from the pleasure of things by a contemplation that is not possession. Here is this writer's kind of interior monologue: "What I played at will really happen. I did not redeem myself through writing. I have spent my life dying, and what is more, I will really die. My life has been gentler than others' lives, my death will only be more terrible. Naturally, the writer that is in me will die immediately, for such a figure has no ground, no reality, it is not even made of dust; this figure is possible, only a little possible in earthly life at its most senseless, and is but a construction of concupiscence. Such is the writer. But I myself cannot continue to live, because I have not lived, I have remained clay, and the spark that I could not turn into fire, I have only made it serve to illuminate my corpse." "It will be a strange burial," adds Kafka: "the writer, something that does not exist, conveys the old corpse, the lifelong corpse to the grave. I am writer enough to want to enjoy this fully in the full oblivion of myself—and not with lucidity; the oblivion of self is the first condition of the writer—or, what amounts to the same, to want to tell it; but this will no longer happen. And why only speak of true death? In life, it is the same thing. . . ." A little further on, Kafka makes these two remarks: "I must add that in my fear of traveling the thought that for several days I will be separated from my writing desk plays a role. This ridiculous thought is in reality the only legitimate one, for the existence of the writer really depends on his table, he does not have the right to move from it if he wants to escape madness, he must hang on to it with his teeth. The definition of the writer, of such a writer, and the explanation of the action he exerts (if there is one): he is the scapegoat of humanity, he allows men to take pleasure in a sin innocently, almost innocently."

Without claiming to give a commentary on these lines, what one can nonetheless remark is that the affirmations that follow one another here are not all on the same level. There are clear affirmations: to write is to put oneself outside life, it is to take pleasure in one's death through an imposture that will become a frightening reality; the poor, real ego to whom one offers the prospect of a short trip is literally beaten, tormented, and thrashed by the devil; henceforth, the world is forbidden, life is impossible, solitude inevitable: "With this, it is decided that I no longer have the right to leave Bohemia, soon I will have to limit myself to Prague, then to my room, then to my bed, then to a certain position of my body, then to nothing. Perhaps then I would freely be able to renounce the happiness of writing—yes, freely and with rejoicing, this is what is important." The anguish of being alone here is almost captured. Writing is thus a bad activity, but not only for these reasons: also for others more obscure. For writing is a nocturnal thing; it is to abandon oneself to the dark powers, to descend into the regions down there, to give oneself to impure embraces. All these expressions have an immediate truth for Kafka. They evoke the tenebrous fascination, the dark glow of desire, the passion of what is unleashed in the night in which everything ends with radical death. And what does he mean by "the forces down there"? We do not know. However, increasingly he will associate words and the use of words with the approach of a spectral unreality, greedy for living things and capable of exhausting any truth. This is why during his last year he will almost cease to write, even to his friends, and above all he will cease to speak of himself: "It is true, I am not writing anything, but not because I have something to hide (insofar as this is not my life's vocation). . . . Above all, as I have made it a law for myself these last years for strategic reasons, I do not have confidence either in words or in letters, neither in my words nor in my
letters; I am perfectly willing to share my heart with men but not with the specters that play with words and read letters, tongues hanging out."

The conclusion should thus categorically be the following: no longer to write. Yet it is altogether different (and for twenty years it did not vary): "Writing is for me what is most necessary and most important." And he did not fail to make the reasons for this necessity known to us, and even to repeat them to us in his different letters: that if he did not write, he would go mad. Writing is madness, is his madness, but this madness is his reason. It is his damnation, but a damnation that is his only way to salvation (if there remains one for him). Between the two certainties of losing himself—lost if he writes, lost if he does not write—he tries to create a passage for himself, and this by way of writing again, but a writing that invokes the specters in the hope of warding them off. In the letter to Brod in which he speaks in such a disquieting manner about his words being in the hands of ghosts,” he adds the following in passing, which greatly clarifies for us perhaps his hopes as a writer: "It sometimes seems to me that the essence of art, the existence of art, can be explained only by such 'strategic considerations': to make possible a true speech from man to man." 

I would like to translate the impression left by the letters written during the last year. Kafka, whom the least move disrupted, made the decision to live in Berlin, far from his family and friends, with Dora Diamant, whose acquaintance he had made in Muritz in July 1923 (he died in June 1924; thus he lived with her for only a few months). Until then, it indeed seemed that, although ill, he was not yet dangerously ill. The illness was worsening, but slowly. It is the stay in Berlin that proved fatal to him. The harsh winter, the unfavorable climate, the precarious conditions of existence, the scarcity of this big city starved and agitated by civil war represented a threat that he could only be very conscious of, but from which, despite the entreaties of his friends, he refused to remove himself; it took the intervention of his uncle, "the country doctor," to make him decide to change residences several weeks before the tubercular laryngitis declares itself. This indifference to his health is a new phenomenon. It is also marked by this feature; whereas until 1923 his least discomforts occupy him greatly, he almost refrains from speaking about them as soon as the situation becomes more serious; and it is with a remarkable sobriety and discretion that he makes his condition known, henceforth disastrous: "If one comes to terms with the tubercular laryngitis, my condition is tolerable, I can swallow again, for the time being." And in the last sentences of his last letter to Brod, after the latter had come from Prague to see him one last time, he is anxious to point out that there are still joyful moments: "Aside from all these subjects of complaint, there are also naturally several minuscule gaieties, but it is impossible to describe them or they have to be saved for a visit like the one that was so miserably spoiled by me. Good-bye. Thank you for everything." This refusal to complain, the silence about himself that, in their reticence, almost all the Berlin letters make sensible, is the only sign of the change that has occurred in his life. A silence that is tense, watched over, voluntary. "There is little to tell about me, a life somewhat in the shadows; he who does not see it directly will notice nothing about it." "In reality it is very calm around me, never too calm, moreover." And to Milena: "My state of health is not essentially different from what it was in Prague. This is all. I will not venture to say more; what is said is already too much."

One can interpret this silence.6 Does he refuse to speak of himself because his fate is too close to the fate of another being of whom he does not consent to speak? Does he want henceforth to keep his secret for this being? Or else, with greater force and coherence than ever before, has he closed himself in on his solitude, become even for himself the "man buried in himself, imprisoned within himself by foreign locks" of whom he speaks to Klopstock in 1922? Does he truly distrust written words and the ghostly way of communicating that wears away truth by entrusting it to deceitful and unfaithful messengers? This last point, though it does not explain everything, is certain. Even on the subject of his literary writings, he remarked that fiction shows reality the way. Thus, in
the Country Doctor, in which he describes a strange bloody wound, he sees the anticipation of his hemoptyses, which occur shortly thereafter. An even more impressive coincidence when, in March 1924, the terminal phase of the illness begins with an extinction of the voice; he has just completed his narrative Josephine, in which he writes about a singing mouse who believes herself blessed with an exceptional gift for chirping and whistling, because she is no longer capable of the means of expression that are in use by her people. He then says to Klopstock: "I think I undertook my research on animal chirping at the right moment."

How not to evoke here his remark about the anguishing discovery of the writer when the latter, at the last moment, sees himself taken at his word by reality? "What I played at will really happen." Was it like this for him? The play of speech coming visibly and painfully to its end, did he refuse to speak further of it, henceforth applying all of his attention to greeting in silence the silent approach of the event? Yet this distrust of words does not prevent him from pursuing his task of writing to the end. Much to the contrary, no longer able to speak, he is permitted only to write, and rarely has agony been so written as his. As if death, with the humor that is particular to it, had thus sought to warn him that it was preparing to change him entirely into a writer—"something that does not exist."

§ 28 The Very Last Word

Commenting one day on Kafka's letters that had just appeared in their original text, I said that the Complete Works would always be missing a last volume because the nature of posthumous publications was to make them inexhaustible. Why? First of all, for reasons of fact. Missing at the time were the letters to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, letters that a difficult negotiation had momentarily excluded from the edition. Information that was capable of shedding more light on the encounter with Dora Diamant, the encounter with which his life ended, was also missing and no doubt will be missing for a long time, not to say forever. (By this I mean not the outside testimonies that can still be gathered, but Kafka's judgment, his speech, the notes of his Diary.)

This commentary is approximately ten years old. Now (since October 1967) that we are in possession of all of the letters to Felice B., with few exceptions, including those to Grete Bloch, the enigmatic friend of the couple (that is to say, a volume of more than 700 pages); now that we have in hand the documents collected slowly and conscientiously by Klaus Wagenbach (the first volume of the biography he is working on appeared in 1958 and was translated in the Mercure de France Editions; then there is the Kafka-Symposium edited by him with several authors, which brings together documents on diverse and unelucidated points, in particular a chronology of the texts, as well as a long and important