example, those on magnetic tape, where voices are contiguous yet do not mix), discontinuous words, affirmations, not only fragmentary but related to an experience of the fragmentary.


4. I am alluding not only to a peculiarity of personal history, but to another sort of truth: “to be Jewish” extracts no more from the fatality (or dignity) of being—understood as race, as biological or even biographical vocation—than a power that is unconditionally free. One could even say that it also comes from our belonging to “humanity,” no doubt; and that is why both belongings go through the same vicissitudes. One does not become a Jew through gracious consent. One is a Jew before being one, and at the same time this anteriority that precedes being Jewish and, in some way, history, does not root it in a nature (in the certitude of a natural identity), but in an already formed otherness, which, even so, has never yet occurred, and which must be answered, without being able to turn down the responsibility. From this “the condition of the Jew” is the most reflexive, and at all times sealed by an affirmation more inveterate than nature, more necessary than it, and from which one would not be able to hide, even if one ran from it.

5. In the book *Difficile Liberté* (Editions Albin Michel), in which Emmanuel Levinas, with his customary depth and authority in speaking of Judaism, speaks of what concerns us all, I find, among many essential reflections, the following: “The oral law is eternally contemporaneous to the written. Between them there exists a relationship whose intellection is the very atmosphere of Judaism. The one neither maintains nor destroys the other—but makes it practical and readable. To penetrate this dimension every day and to maintain oneself in it was the work of the famous study of the Torah, the celebrated *Lemen* that occupies a central place in Jewish religious life.”

6. Martin Buber, *Les Récits hassidiques* (Plon). The translation, worthy of the original—an original without origin—is by Armel Guerne. This is what Buber says about working on the collection: “It was transmitted to me [the legend of the Hasidim] through popular books, notebooks, and manuscripts, but I also heard it from living lips, from lips that had received its stammering message. I have not adapted it as if it were just any piece of literature, I have not worked on it as if it were a fable: I have told it in my turn, like a posthumous son . . . I am only a link in the chain of narrators, I repeat in my turn the old story, and if it sounds new, it is because the new was in it the first time it was ever told.”

I would also like to recommend another book, by Robert Misrahi, *La Condition reflexive de l’homme juif* (Julliard), and in particular a chapter titled “The Significance of Nazi Anti-Semitism as the Original Experience of the Modern Jew.” From it I take the following passage for consideration: “For the Jew, the enormity of the Nazi catastrophe reveals the depth to which anti-Semitism has been ‘anchored,’ and reveals anti-Semitism to be a permanent possibility. . . . Consciousness of the Catastrophe, as if derived from a renewed Jewish consciousness, is a sort of sinister conversion, not to light but to darkness. This past beginning, this primitive experience beyond which it is impossible to go, constitutes, in effect, for Jewish consciousness a method of somber initiation: it is the apprenticeship of wisdom and fear. “To be a Jew” is something that cannot be defined for the cultured, assimilated Jew, except paradoxically and circuitously: by the mere fact of always being susceptible to gratuitous murder “because of being Jewish.” The whole of society becomes for him a permanent possibility of mutation and from now on will constitute a latent menace. R. Misrahi adds, “Nazi anti-Semitism is not simply a historical phenomenon for which we can determine the causes and sociological structures. . . . If it is that, it is also something else: the manifestation of pure violence addressed without motivation to the other, simply because he incarncates the scandal of another existence.”

Chapter 25

1. One would have to qualify this assertion.

2. “Between me and you,” says a maxim of Hallaj, “there is an ‘I am’ that torments me. Ah! Remove with your ‘I am’ my ‘I am’ from between us.”

3. G. G. Scholem, *Les Grands Courants de la mystique juive*, translated by M.-M. David (Payot). I would like to make it clear that I certainly did not fail to use this remarkable book for this commentary, as well as the following works of Buber: *Die chassidische Botschaft und Sehertum (Anfang und Ausgang).*


Chapter 26

1. Besides the biography, Brod dedicated several volumes to his friend in which he specifies what were, according to his views, the “belief and teaching” of Kafka.
2. Diary, note from May 3, 1915.

3. In a later chapter, Pepi, Frieda's replacement, who tries to seduce K., explains to K. at great length the intrigue in which Klamm's girlfriend has engaged herself by throwing herself around the neck of a stranger, to attract attention through scandal and to recover a little of the prestige that her feeble physical attractions and her disagreeable character have caused her to lose. Moreover, is she Klamm's girlfriend? Everything leads one to think that this is a fable, cleverly concocted by the ambitious Frieda. Such is Pepi's point of view, in keeping with her own miserable little existence. K. himself puts no faith in it, though he is tempted to find refuge in the underground passageways of a sad servant's life. "You are wrong," he says. In the final pages, he tries, not without success, to strike up a new intrigue with the wife of the innkeeper of the Herrenhof. Thus everything begins again, but this incessant beginning-again of situations also shows that everything is stuck, even the book, which can only interrupt itself.

4. In a fragment, an observer from the village makes a mockery of what he calls "the adventure" that K. has had with Bürgel. "It is all too comical," he says, "that it had to be Bürgel." Bürgel is, in effect, the secretary of Frederic, an official of the Castle, who has for some time fallen into disgrace and no longer has any influence. All the more reason for it to be Bürgel, who is but a secretary of the lowest rank.

Chapter 27

1. It is this biography that Klaus Wagenbach has undertaken to write, a work that is very instructive (Franz Kafka, eine Biographie seiner Jugend, 1958). Cf. the next chapter, devoted to the letters written by Kafka to his first fiancée, Felice Bauer, letters excluded from this first volume of the correspondence as a result of an editorial agreement.

2. I would remind the reader that the Letters to Milena were published as a separate volume in 1952.

3. He writes to Brod: "The bad opinion that I have of myself is not an ordinary bad opinion. This opinion constitutes rather my sole virtue; it is that which I should never, never have to doubt, when I have drawn reasonable limits for it in the course of my life; it puts order in me, and for me, who in the face of what I cannot embrace break down immediately, it makes me passably peaceful." This reflection is from 1912: the bad opinion is still but methodical; moreover, circumscribed and measured. "What I have written," he says in the same letter, "was written in a warm bath, I did not live the eternal hell of real writers." The letters confirm what we sensed: that the dramatic relations with life begin around his thirtieth year, when on the one hand writing becomes the absolute exigency, and on the other he encounters his fiancée. The year 1912 precisely marks the rupture. Until then, during the years dominated by the father, he is certainly already "in despair," but it is a despair illuminated by humor, scintillating and almost light, threatened by aesthetic pleasure, of which the following is an example: "For I have been, as I saw this morning before washing up, in despair for two years, and only the more or less distant limit of this despair determines my mood of the moment. And here I am at a café, I have read several pretty things, I am doing well, and I do not speak of my despair with as much conviction as I would have liked to have liked to at home" (1908). What is there in common with this cry: "In the fields, outside the madness of my head and my nights. Such a being am I, such a being am I. I torment her, and myself to death" (1916)?

4. The same is true in the last letters to Milena, but to Milena with more humor.

5. We also know from many other texts that he does not hold his art originally responsible for the life outside the world to which it dooms him: it was first imposed on him by his relations with his father; it is by him that he was exiled from life, pushed outside the borders, condemned to wander in exile. Art but translated, exploited, and deepened this earlier fatality. Kafka, furthermore, is far from always speaking unfavorably of this life outside the world, which, on the contrary, he sought out with unrelenting strength. In June 1921, to Brod: "The first slightly peaceful day after fifteen days of martyrdom. This life-outside-the-world that I lead is not in itself worse than the other, there is no reason to complain about it, but when the world, desecrator of tombs, begins to scream even into this life-outside-the-world, I come off my hinges and I really knock my head against the door of madness, which is always but half-open. The least thing suffices to put me in this state."

6. One must also mention the circumstances: during this period, Max Brod is in a painful emotional state—married in Prague, he is passionately attached to a young woman who lives in Berlin. Kafka often sees this young woman, and he knows that it is first of all of her that he must speak to his friend.

7. During his last days, Kafka held himself strictly to the orders not to
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Chapter 28

1. Cf. the preceding chapter.

2. I refer to the letter that Kafka wrote to Milena in which he describes with his invariable candor "his first night" (L'écho de Milena, postface to volume VIII of Kafka's Œuvres complètes; Cercle du Livre Précieux).

3. One day when Felice evokes his "bent for writing": "Not a bent, I have no bent, writing is my whole self. A bent, one could wipe out or reduce. But it is myself. Certainly, one could do away with me, but what would be left for you?"

4. In particular on the day of the trial when he gives up justifying himself and also when he writes a letter to Mlle. Bloch in which, although recently engaged, he speaks of his horror of marriage, a letter that his correspondent wrongly shows to Felice, such that Felice is struck with a feeling of painful duplicity, for the truth, of which she had been warned so many times by Kafka directly, had become a power of deadly objectivity (as it always happens) as soon as it had been communicated to her by someone else.

5. On the relation to "truth," one would have to cite the letter of Sept. 20, 1917—the next-to-last letter I believe—already partially published in the Diary. "For five years you have been kept informed as to the progress of the struggle, by word and by silence and by a combination of the two, and most often it has been a torment for you. . . . If you ask whether it has always been in keeping with the truth, I can only say that with no one else but you I held myself so strenuously from conscious lies. There have been certain attenuations [Verschleierungen], but very few lies, assuming that in what concerns lies it is possible for there to be 'very few.'" The continuation can be read in the Diary with, at the end and in form of a verdict, the following: "In summary, it is only the tribunal of men that is important to me, and it is this tribunal, moreover, that I wish to deceive, though without deception."

6. On "literature" and the danger it represents, responding to Felice, who judged herself, in everything, to be less than he: "I would be 'more advanced than you in everything? A small capacity for judging men and

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for putting myself in their place out of sympathy, this I have. . . . I have no memory, not for things learned, or read, or experienced, or heard; it is as if I had no experience of anything; I know less about most things than the smallest schoolboy. I cannot think; in my thinking, I constantly come up against limits; certainly, I am still able to grasp this or that isolated point, but a coherent thought, capable of elaboration, is impossible for me. I cannot even tell a story, or even speak. . . . All I have are certain . . . .

1. Cf. the preceding chapter.

2. I refer to the letter that Kafka wrote to Milena in which he describes with his implacable candor "his first night" (L'écho de Milena, postface to volume VIII of Kafka's Œuvres complètes; Cercle du Livre Précieux).

3. One day when Felice evokes his "bent for writing": "Not a bent, I have no bent, writing is my whole self. A bent, one could wipe out or reduce. But it is myself. Certainly, one could do away with me, but what would be left for you?"

4. In particular on the day of the trial when he gives up justifying himself and also when he writes a letter to Mlle. Bloch in which, although recently engaged, he speaks of his horror of marriage, a letter that his correspondent wrongly shows to Felice, such that Felice is struck with a feeling of painful duplicity, for the truth, of which she had been warned so many times by Kafka directly, had become a power of deadly objectivity (as it always happens) as soon as it had been communicated to her by someone else.

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