

the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction

Walter Benjamin

origin of the concept of literature

the book of the traditions



theses on the philosophy of history

Illuminations

Essays and Reflections

Edited by Hannah Arendt

the storyteller

some reflections on Kafka

New preface by Leon Wieseltier

WALTER BENJAMIN

Illuminations

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Contents

PREFACE BY LEON WIESELTIER	vii
INTRODUCTION	
<i>Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940</i> , by Hannah Arendt	I
UNPACKING MY LIBRARY	
<i>A Talk about Book Collecting</i>	59
THE TASK OF THE TRANSLATOR	
<i>An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux parisiens</i>	69
THE STORYTELLER	
<i>Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov</i>	83
FRANZ KAFKA	
<i>On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death</i>	111
SOME REFLECTIONS ON KAFKA	141
WHAT IS EPIC THEATER?	147
ON SOME MOTIFS IN BAUDELAIRE	155
THE IMAGE OF PROUST	201
THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION	217
THESES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY	253
EDITOR'S NOTE	265
INDEX OF NAMES	269



Franz Kafka

On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death

POTEMKIN

It is related 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 incurred the disfavor of Empress Catherine. One of the Chancellor's depressions lasted for an extraordinary length of time and brought about 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 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,

Illuminations

through galleries and corridors, for Potemkin's bedroom. Without stopping or bothering to knock, 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, 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 racing two hundred years ahead of Kafka's work. The enigma which beclouds it is Kafka's enigma. The world of offices and registries, of musty, shabby, dark rooms, is Kafka's world. The obliging Shuvalkin, who makes light of everything and is finally left empty-handed, is Kafka's K. Potemkin, 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 the figures of Atlas that support globes with their shoulders? Perhaps that is why each has his head "so deep on his chest that one can hardly see his eyes," like the Castellan in his portrait, or Klamm when he is alone. But it is not the globe they are carrying; it is just that even the most commonplace things have

Franz Kafka

their weight. "His fatigue is that of the gladiator after the fight; his job was the whitewashing of a corner in the office!" 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 ages, Kafka thinks in terms of cosmic epochs. The man who whitewashes has epochs to move, even in his most insignificant movement. 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."

We encounter 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 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, threw the blanket off with such strength that it unfolded fully as it flew, and 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; guilt attracts him as it does the court officials. There is much to indicate that the world of the officials and the world of the fathers are the same to Kafka. The similarity does not redound to this world's credit; it consists of dullness, decay, and dirt. The father's uniform is stained all over; his underwear

Illuminations

is dirty. Filth is the element of the 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." Uncleanliness is so much the attribute of officials that one could almost regard them as enormous parasites. This, of course, does not refer 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. The fathers punish, but they are at the same time the 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." 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., "that one is sentenced not only in innocence but also in ignorance." Laws and definite norms remain unwritten in the prehistoric world. A man can transgress them without suspecting it and thus become subject to 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 cursory investigation

Franz Kafka

of 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 books, 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 use 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 *The Castle* and *The Trial*, girls who indulge in unchastity 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 but go on and lose oneself even further." 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 the accused persons, for example. "This, to be sure, is a strange phenomenon, a natural law, as it were. . . .

Illuminations

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 *The Trial* it may be seen that these proceedings usually are 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 a conversation which Max Brod has related. "I remember," Brod writes, "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.'" 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.

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 "Meditation"; the student who appears on the balcony at night as Karl Rossmann's neighbor; and the fools who live in that town in the south and never get tired. The twilight in which they exist is reminiscent of the uncertain light in which the figures in the short prose pieces of Robert Walser appear [the author of *Der Gehülfe*, *The Assistant*, a novel Kafka was very fond of]. In Indian mythology there are the

Franz Kafka

gandharvas, celestial 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 from one to the other. 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 women's 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." It is for them and their kind, the unfinished and the bunglers, that there is hope.

What may be discerned, subtly and informally, in the activities of these messengers is law in an oppressive and gloomy way for this whole group of beings. None has a firm place in the world, 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 of which we think in this context is incomparably younger than Kafka's world, which has been promised redemption by the 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 go by "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

Illuminations

childish measures may also serve to rescue one." With these words he begins his story about 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 the human understanding is beyond its depths, that the Sirens were silent, and opposed the afore-mentioned 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 commonplace, comforting and silly—in which the 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."

A CHILDHOOD PHOTOGRAPH

There is a childhood photograph of Kafka, a rarely touching portrayal of the "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 approximately 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 model holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the land-

Franz Kafka

scape prearranged for them, and the auricle of a big ear seems to be listening for its sounds.

The ardent "wish to become a Red Indian" may have consumed this great sadness at some point. "If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against 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 heath, 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 he experiences a rebirth on a new continent with a full name. He has this experience in the Nature Theater of Oklahoma. "At a street corner Karl saw a poster with the following announcement: The Oklahoma Theater will engage members for its company today at Clayton Racetrack from 6 a.m. until midnight. 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 should be one of 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 happier 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 wrote his "reflections for gentleman jockeys," ever since he made the "new attorney" mount the courthouse steps, lifting his legs high, with a tread that made the marble ring, ever since he made his "children on a country road" amble through the

Illuminations

countryside with large steps and folded arms, this figure had been familiar to him; and even Karl Rossmann, "distracted by his sleepiness," may often make "too high, time-consuming, and useless leaps." 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. The mysterious place and the entirely unmysterious, transparent, pure figure of Karl Rossmann are congruous, however. For Karl Rossmann is transparent, pure, without character as it were in the same sense in which Franz Rosenzweig says in his *Star of Redemption* that in China people, in their spiritual aspects, are "as it were devoid of individual character; 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." No matter how one may convey it intellectually, this purity of feeling may be a particularly sensitive measurement of gestic behavior; the Nature Theater of Oklahoma in any case harks back to the Chinese theater, which is a gestic theater. One of the most significant functions of this theater is to dissolve happenings into their gestic 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 recognize with certainty 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 "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. Wese leaves the building in which his office is located. But this doorbell, so we are expressly told, is 'too loud for a doorbell; it rings out over the town and up to

Franz Kafka

heaven.'” 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 did he eschew adapting these gestures to common situations or explaining them. “It is strange behavior,” we read in “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.” *The Trial* 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; at that place 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 invisible.” What Kafka could see 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 the 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. The people who have assumed responsibility for the knock at the manor gate walk doubled 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 upwards 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.” This animal gesture combines the utmost

Illuminations

mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity. It is possible to read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not about human beings at all. When one encounters the name of the creature—monkey, dog, mole—one looks up in fright and realizes that one is already far away from the continent of man. But it is always Kafka; he divests the 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 "Before the Law." The reader who read it in *A Country Doctor* may have been struck by the cloudy spot in it. But would it have led him to the never-ending series of reflections traceable to this parable at the place where Kafka undertakes to interpret it? This is done by the priest in *The Trial*, 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 the parable; it is the reader's pleasure to smooth 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 resembles poetry. This does not mean that his prose pieces belong entirely in the tradition of Western prose forms; they have, rather, a similar relationship to doctrine as the Haggadah does to the Halakah. They are not parables, and yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotation and can be told for purposes of clarification. But do we have the doctrine which Kafka's parables interpret and which K.'s postures and the gestures of his animals clarify? It does not exist; all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine. In every case it is a question of how life and work are organized in human society. This ques-

Franz Kafka

tion increasingly occupied Kafka as it became impenetrable to him. If Napoleon, in his famous conversation with Goethe at Erfurt, substituted politics for fate, Kafka, in a variation of this statement, could have defined organization as destiny. He faces it not only in the extensive hierarchy of officialdom in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, but even more concretely in the difficult and incalculable construction plans whose venerable model he dealt with in *The Great Wall of China*.

"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, 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 even 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," he writes, "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 of men 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 between groups of people that frequently are alien or even hostile to one another; it sentences everyone to labors whose common useful-

Illuminations

ness 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 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 he 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. His testament 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 before the law. Perhaps Kafka, whose every day on earth brought him up against insoluble behavior problems and undecipherable 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 the stage from the very beginning. The proof of the pudding is the fact that everyone is accepted 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

Franz Kafka

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 just as Pirandello's six characters sought 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, is "blocked . . . by his own frontal bone." The law of this theater is contained in a sentence tucked away in "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 wearing top hats who have come for him and asks them: "What theater are you playing at?" "Theater?" asked one, the corners of his mouth twitching as he looked for advice to the other, who acted as if he were a mute struggling to overcome a stubborn disability." The men do not answer this question, but there is much to indicate that it has hit home.

At a long bench which has been covered with a white cloth all those who will henceforth be with the Nature Theater are fed. "They were all happy and excited." By way of celebration, extras act as angels. They stand on high pedestals that are covered with flowing raiments and have stairs inside—the makings of a country church fair, or maybe a children's festival, which may have eliminated the sadness from the eyes of the tightly laced, dressed-up boy we discussed above. But for the fact that their wings are tied on, these angels might be real. They have forerunners in Kafka's works. One of them is the impresario who climbs up on the luggage rack next to the trapeze artist beset by his "first sorrow," caresses him and presses his face against the artist's, "so that he was bathed by the trapeze artist's tears." Another, a guardian angel or guardian of the law, takes care of Schmar the murderer following the "fratricide" and leads him away, stepping lightly, with Schmar's "mouth pressed against the policeman's shoulder." Kafka's *Amerika* ends with the rustic ceremonies of Oklahoma. "In Kafka," said Soma Morgenstern, "there is the air of a village, as with all great founders of

Illuminations

religions." Lao-tse's presentation of piousness is all the more pertinent here because Kafka has supplied its most perfect description in "The Next Village." "Neighboring countries may be within sight, so that the sounds of roosters and dogs may be heard in the distance. And yet people are said to die at a ripe old age without having traveled far." Thus Lao-tse. Kafka was a writer of parables, but he did not found a religion.

Let us consider the village at the foot of Castle Hill whence K.'s alleged employment as a land surveyor is so mysteriously and unexpectedly confirmed. In his Postscript to *The Castle* Brod mentioned that in depicting this village at the foot of Castle Hill Kafka had in mind a specific place, Zürau in the Erz Gebirge. We may, however, also recognize another village in it. It is the village in a Talmudic legend told by a rabbi in answer to the question why Jews prepare a festive evening meal on Fridays. The legend is about a princess languishing in exile, in a village whose language she does not understand, far from her compatriots. One day this princess receives a letter saying that her fiancé has not forgotten her and is on his way to her. The fiancé, so says the rabbi, is the Messiah; the princess is the soul; the village in which she lives in exile is the body. She prepares a meal for him because this is the only way in which she can express her joy in a village whose language she does not know. This village of the Talmud is right in Kafka's world. For just as K. lives in the village on Castle Hill, modern man lives in his 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. Exile—his exile—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, to knock against which brings ruin—all these are part of this village. The air in this village is not free of all the abortive and overripe elements that form such a putrid mixture. This is the air that Kafka had to breathe all 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 maid who had killed her infant child. She was sentenced to a prison term. Soon thereafter the local paper printed a letter from Hamsun in which he announced his intention of leaving a town which did not visit 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 maid 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 *The Great Wall of China*, recall this to mind. Hardly had this volume appeared when the reflections served as the basis for a Kafka criticism which concentrated on an interpretation of these reflections to the neglect of his real works. There are two ways to miss the point of Kafka's works. One is to interpret them naturally, the other is the supernatural interpretation. Both the psychoanalytic and the theological interpretations equally 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 did not prevent him from interpreting Kafka's work after a theological pattern. "The powers above, the realm of grace," so Haas writes, "Kafka has depicted in his great novel *The Castle*; the powers below, the realm of the courts and of damnation, he has dealt with in his equally great novel *The Trial*. The earth between the two, earthly fate and its arduous demands, he attempted to present in strictly stylized form in a third novel, *Amerika*." The first third of this interpretation has, since Brod, become the common property of Kafka criticism. Bernhard Rang

Illuminations

writes in a similar vein: "To the extent that one may regard the Castle as the seat of grace, precisely these vain efforts and attempts mean, theologically speaking, that God's grace cannot be attained or forced by man at will and deliberately. Unrest and impatience only impede and confound the exalted stillness of the divine." This interpretation is a convenient one; but the further it is carried, the clearer it becomes that it is untenable. This is perhaps seen most clearly in a statement by Willy Haas. "Kafka goes back . . . to Kierkegaard as well as to Pascal; one may call him the only legitimate heir of these two. In all three there is an excruciatingly harsh basic religious theme: man is always in the wrong before God. . . . Kafka's upper world, his so-called Castle, with its immense, complex staff of petty and rather lecherous officials, his strange heaven plays a horrible game with people . . . and yet man is very much in the wrong even before this god." This theology falls far behind the doctrine of justification of St. Anselm of Canterbury into barbaric speculations which do not even seem consistent with the text of Kafka's works. "Can an individual official forgive?" we read in *The Castle*. "This could only be a matter for the over-all authorities, but even they can probably not forgive but only judge." This road has soon led into a blind alley. "All this," says Denis de Rougemont, "is not the wretched situation of man without a god, but the wretched state of a man who is bound to a god he does not know, because he does not know Christ."

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 before 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. Was it not the Last Judgment? Does it not turn the judge into the

defendant? Is the trial not the punishment? Kafka gave no answer. Did he expect anything of this punishment? Or was he not rather concerned to postpone it? In the stories which Kafka left us, narrative art regains the significance it had in the mouth of Scheherazade: to postpone the future. In *The Trial* postponement is the hope of the accused man only if the proceedings do not gradually turn into the judgment. The patriarch himself is to 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.'"

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 testament 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 doctrine, to turn it into a parable and restore to it that stability and unpretentiousness which, in the face of reason, seemed to him to be 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 was to outlive him." With these words *The Trial* ends. Corresponding as it does to his "elemental purity of feeling," shame 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 pretensions. Shame is not only shame

Illuminations

in the presence of others, but can also be shame one feels for them. 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." We do not know the make-up 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 as 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." 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, created things appear at the stage which Bachofen has termed the hetaeric stage. The fact that it is now forgotten does not mean that it does not extend into the present. On the contrary: it is actual by virtue of this very oblivion. An experience deeper than that of an average person can make contact with it. "I have experience," 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." It is no accident that the first "Meditation" was made 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 "The Knock at the Manor Gate." "With my sister I was passing the gate of a great house on our way home. I don't remember whether she knocked on the gate out of mischief or in a fit of absent-mindedness, 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

Franz Kafka

web of skin reached almost to the top joint, short as the fingers were." "Fine times," so the ambivalent Frieda reminisces about her earlier life; "you never asked me about my past." This past takes us back to the dark, deep womb, the scene of the mating "whose untrammelled 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]."

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 was being imparted, as though the hero was just being subtly invited to recall to mind something that he had forgotten. This is how Willy Haas has interpreted the course of events in *The Trial*, and justifiably so. "The object of the trial," he writes, "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 piety. It is not an ordinary, 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."

What has been forgotten—and this insight affords us yet another avenue of access to Kafka's work—is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, 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 as the only reality. All spirit must be concrete, particularized in order

Franz Kafka

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. . . . Without any scruples their fullness is crammed into the fullness of the world. . . . The crowd of spirits is swelled without any concern . . . new ones are constantly added to the old ones, and all are distinguished from the others by their own names." All this does not refer to Kafka, but to—China. This is how Franz Rosenzweig describes the Chinese ancestor cult in his *Star of Redemption*. To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable as the world of realities was important for him, 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 "Fair Eckbert," the forgotten name of a little dog, Strohm, stands for a mysterious guilt. One can understand, then, that Kafka did not tire of picking up 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." Can one not see the animals in "The Burrow" or "The Giant Mole" ponder as they dig in? And 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." "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. However, because the most forgotten alien land is one's own body, one can understand why Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him "the animal." It was the most advanced outpost of the great herd.

The strangest bastard which the prehistoric world has begotten with guilt in Kafka is Odradek [in "The Cares of a Family

Man”]. “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, they probably are only old, broken-off bits of thread that are knotted and tangled together, of all sorts and colors. But it is not just a spool, for a small wooden cross-bar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to it at a right angle. 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.” Odradek “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 the necessity 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 some day 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, of which we know all too well that it 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, the hunchback. 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 backs of guilty men, 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 writing 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 be as heavy as possible, which I believe to be an aid

Illuminations

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." 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, of whom a great rabbi once said that he did not wish to change the world by force, but would only 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 does he shake.

This is the laughter of Odradek, which is described as sounding "something like the rustling in 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.

So ends the folksong. In his depth Kafka touches the ground which neither "mythical divination" nor "existential theology" supplied him with. It is the core of folk tradition, the German as well as the 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. And in this attentiveness he included all living 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

Franz Kafka

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 everyone 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.

This story takes us right into the milieu of 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 have had this in mind, and in this certainty he made the grandfather in "The Next Village" 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 brother is the beggar whose "normal" life that "passes happily" does not even leave him time for a wish, but who is exempted from this wish in the abnormal, unhappy life, that is, the flight which he attempts in his story, and exchanges the wish for its fulfillment.

Among Kafka's creatures 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

Illuminations

get tired?'—'How could fools get tired?'" 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 faces of the assistants that they seem to be those of "grown-ups, perhaps even students." 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 these 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.

Their crowning achievement is studying. Reverently Kafka unearths it from long-lost boyhood. "Not very unlike this—a long time ago—Karl had sat at home at his parents' table writing 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 material in her hand. To avoid disturbing his father, Karl used to 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!" Perhaps these studies had amounted to nothing. But they are very close to that nothing which alone makes it possible for something to be useful—that is, 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 'Ham-

Franz Kafka

mering 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." 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; then he has to jump up, catch the dictation, quickly sit down again and write it down, then jump up again and so forth. How strange that is! It is almost incomprehensible!" 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 people in other ways as well. Truly, for them "hammering is real hammering and at the same time nothing"—provided that this is part of their role. They study this role, and only a bad actor would forget a word or a movement. 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 not so the student whom Karl watches silently on the balcony as he 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 face surprisingly close to the paper."

Kafka does not grow tired of representing the *gestus* 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. The invention of the film 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 walk on the screen or his own voice on the phonograph. The situation of the subject in such experiments is Kafka's situation; this is what directs him to learning, 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

Illuminations

Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold. He might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required! It is a tempest that blows from the land of oblivion, and learning 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 heath, 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 untrammelled, happy journey, no longer a burden on his race horse. But accursed is the rider who is chained to his nag because he has set himself a goal for the future, even though it is as close as the coal cellar—accursed his animal, accursed both of them. "Seated on the bucket, my hands up on the handle, with the simplest kind of bridle, I propel myself with difficulty down the stairs; but once down below, my bucket ascends, superbly, superbly; camels lying flat on the ground do not rise any more handsomely as they shake themselves under the sticks of their drivers." There is no more hopeless vista than that of "the regions of the ice mountains" in which the bucket rider drops out of sight forever. From the "nethermost regions of death" blows the wind that is favorable to him, the same wind which so often blows from the prehistoric world in Kafka's works, and which also propels the boat of the hunter Gracchus. "At mysteries and sacrifices, among Greeks as well as barbarians," writes Plutarch, "it is taught that there must be two primary essences and two opposing forces, one of which points to the right and straight ahead, whereas the other turns around and drives back." Reversal is the direction of learning which transforms existence into writing. Its teacher is Bucephalus, "the new attorney," 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

Franz Kafka

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: "Nowhere else in literature is there such a powerful and penetrating criticism of the 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 the 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 the 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 and not practiced any longer is the gate to justice.

The gate to justice is learning. And yet Kafka does not dare attach to this learning 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. Now there is nothing to support them on their "untrammelled, happy journey." Kafka, however, has found the law of his journey—at least on one occasion he succeeded in bringing its breath-taking 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 not only because it is an interpretation.

"Without ever boasting of it, Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by supplying a lot of romances of chivalry and adventure for the evening and night 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 a great and profitable entertainment to the end of his days."

Illuminations

Sancho Panza, a sedate fool and 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 removed from the back.



Some Reflections on Kafka*

Kafka's work is an ellipse with foci that are far apart and are determined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (in particular, the experience of tradition) and, on the other, by the experience of the modern big-city dweller. In speaking of the experience of the big-city dweller, I have a variety of things in mind. On the one hand, I think of the modern citizen who knows that he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous to the executive organs, let alone to the people they deal with. (It is known that one level of meaning in the novels, particularly in *The Trial*, is encompassed by this.) When I refer to the modern big-city dweller, I am speaking also of the contemporary of today's physicists. If one reads the following passage from Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*, one can virtually hear Kafka speak.

I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a com-

* This text is contained in a letter to Gerhard Scholem, dated June 12, 1938.

Illuminations

plicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank travelling at twenty miles a second round the sun—a fraction of a second too early or too late, the plank would be miles away. I must do this whilst hanging from a round planet head outward into space, and with a wind of aether blowing at no one knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? No, if I make the venture one of the flies hits me and gives a boost up again; I fall again and am knocked upwards by another fly; and so on. I may hope that the net result will be that I remain about steady; but if unfortunately I should slip through the floor or be boosted too violently up to the ceiling, the occurrence would be, not a violation of the laws of Nature, but a rare coincidence. . . .

Verily, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a scientific man to pass through a door. And whether the door be barn door or church door it might be wiser that he should consent to be an ordinary man and walk in rather than wait till all the difficulties involved in a really scientific ingress are resolved.*

In all of literature I know no passage which has the Kafka stamp to the same extent. Without any effort one could match almost every passage of this physical perplexity with sentences from Kafka's prose pieces, and there is much to indicate that in so doing many of the most "incomprehensible" passages would be accommodated. Therefore, if one says—as I have just said—that there was a tremendous tension between those of Kafka's experiences that correspond to present-day physics and his mystical ones, only a half-truth is stated. What is actually and in a very literal sense wildly incredible in Kafka is that this most recent world of experience was conveyed to him precisely by this mystical tradition. This, of course, could not have happened without devastating processes (to be discussed presently) within this tradition. The long and the short of it is that apparently an appeal had to be made to the forces of this tradition if an individual (by the name of Franz Kafka) was to be confronted with that reality of ours which realizes itself theoretically, for example, in modern

* Arthur Stanley Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, New York-Cambridge, 1929, p. 342. Quoted by Benjamin in German translation.

Some Reflections on Kafka

physics, and practically in the technology of modern warfare. What I mean to say is that this reality can virtually no longer be experienced by an *individual*, and that Kafka's world, frequently of such playfulness and interlaced with angels, is the exact complement of his era which is preparing to do away with the inhabitants of this planet on a considerable scale. The experience which corresponds to that of Kafka, the private individual, will probably not become accessible to the masses until such time as they are being done away with.

Kafka lives in a *complementary* world. (In this he is closely related to Klee, whose work in painting is just as essentially *solitary* as Kafka's work is in literature.) Kafka offered the complement without being aware of what surrounded him. If one says that he perceived what was to come without perceiving what exists in the present, one should add that he perceived it essentially as an *individual* affected by it. His gestures of terror are given scope by the marvelous *margin* which the catastrophe will not grant us. But his experience was based solely on the tradition to which Kafka surrendered; there was no far-sightedness or "prophetic vision." Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard does not see.

The main reason why this listening demands such effort is that only the most indistinct sounds reach the listener. There is no doctrine that one could absorb, no knowledge that one could preserve. The things that want to be caught as they rush by are not meant for anyone's ears. This implies a state of affairs which negatively characterizes Kafka's works with great precision. (Here a negative characterization probably is altogether more fruitful than a positive one.) Kafka's work presents a sickness of tradition. Wisdom has sometimes been defined as the epic side of truth. Such a definition stamps wisdom as inherent in tradition; it is truth in its haggadic consistency.

It is this consistency of truth that has been lost. Kafka was far from being the first to face this situation. Many had accommodated themselves to it, clinging to truth or whatever they happened to regard as truth and, with a more or less heavy heart, forgoing its transmissibility. Kafka's real genius was that he tried

Illuminations

something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its haggadic element. Kafka's writings are by their nature parables. But it is their misery and their beauty that they had to become *more* than parables. They do not modestly lie at the feet of the doctrine, as the Haggadah lies at the feet of the Halakah. Though apparently reduced to submission, they unexpectedly raise a mighty paw against it.

This is why, in regard to Kafka, we can no longer speak of wisdom. Only the products of its decay remain. There are two: one is the rumor about the true things (a sort of theological whispered intelligence dealing with matters discredited and obsolete); the other product of this diathesis is folly—which, to be sure, has utterly squandered the substance of wisdom, but preserves its attractiveness and assurance, which rumor invariably lacks. Folly lies at the heart of Kafka's favorites—from Don Quixote via the assistants to the animals. (Being an animal presumably meant to him only to have given up human form and human wisdom from a kind of shame—as shame may keep a gentleman who finds himself in a disreputable tavern from wiping his glass clean.) This much Kafka was absolutely sure of: first, that someone must be a fool if he is to help; second, that only a fool's help is real help. The only uncertain thing is whether such help can still do a human being any good. It is more likely to help the angels (compare the passage about the angels who get something to do) who could do without help. Thus, as Kafka puts it, there is an infinite amount of hope, but not for us. This statement really contains Kafka's hope; it is the source of his radiant serenity.

I transmit to you this somewhat dangerously compressed image—in the manner of perspective reduction—with all the more ease as you may sharpen it by means of the views I have developed from different aspects in my Kafka essay in the *Jüdische Rundschau*.* My main criticism of that study today is its apologetic character. To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing:

* See the preceding essay.

Some Reflections on Kafka

it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances of this failure are manifold. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream. There is nothing more memorable than the fervor with which Kafka emphasized his failure.

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