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Kafka: The Axe for the Frozen Sea inside Us*

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One year ago, almost to the day, I was in Prague, in the exiguous graveyard attached to the old Synagogue. I had just started writing a new novel and I was having a difficult time with it. The urge to tear up or burn the manuscript is a torment for every writer who takes writing seriously. In my case, there was an added turn of the screw, an unpleasant doubt about the use I was making of my time: Those uncounted hours subtracted from my life as I write down one word and then another, and then erase them both in order to start over, have they been well spent? Milton, in *Lycidas*, put the question this way:

Were it not better done as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

Only I didn't have in mind substituting for writing anything particularly romantic—only the humblest of tasks and pleasures, an extension of one's quiet, day-to-day life.

It was impossible to think these thoughts in that place where I was without reflecting on the short, tormented life of Franz Kafka. That original and incandescent genius was born in Prague in 1883 and died there of tuberculosis in 1924, shortly after his fortieth birthday. His parents survived him; he is buried beside them close by, not in the cemetery where I was but in Prague's other Jewish cemetery, the Strasnice; the three graves are marked by a single stone. Kafka's three sisters survived him as well, but they were murdered by the Germans in concentration camps during World War II.

Very early, perhaps while he was still attending the German gymnasium in Prague, and certainly by the time he had finished his legal studies at Prague's German University, Kafka had realized that he lived for one transcendent reason only: to write stories and novels. An entry in his *Diaries* for 21 June 1913, states that imperative: "The tremendous

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world I have in my head. But how to free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather to be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it. That, indeed, is why I am here, that is clear to me."

"Being torn to pieces" is a reference to the irreconcilable conflict Kafka perceived between writing and any other sort of employment (including journalism, criticism, etc.), and also writing and marriage and having children. Yet Kafka had to earn his living (it was inconceivable to him that his father would support a writer son; perhaps, given the envenomed feelings he had toward the father, it was a solution that would have been worse than having a job), and, consistent with Jewish tradition, he believed that, in order to become a man, he had to marry. Therefore, from 1908 until two years before his death, when illness forced him to retire, he worked during the day—with exceptional competence and loyalty—in a senior management position at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. It is easy to imagine that aspect of his existence when one thinks of Joseph K., the exemplary bank manager, before he is arrested one morning at breakfast and his life is derailed. Kafka's bizarre epistolary courtship of Felice Bauer, a German-Jewish commercial employee living in Berlin, and the two broken engagements to her became a drama that also tore him apart. In the end he didn't dare to marry, although in his fiction, correspondence, and Diaries he wrote about the aridity of the life of an old bachelor with the grim determination of a patient probing his own wound:

It seems so dreadful to stay a bachelor, to become an old man struggling to keep one's dignity while begging for an invitation whenever one wants to spend an evening in company, to lie ill gazing for weeks into an empty room from the corner where one's bed is, always having to say good night at the front door, never to run up a stairway beside one's wife . . . having to admire other people's children and not even being allowed to go on saying: "I have none myself." . . .

Until the richly productive last two years of his life that followed his retirement from the Insurance Institute, Kafka wrote at night, in a fevered trance-like state, the indispensable pent-up *Angst* spurring him on. Otherwise, he claimed in a letter to Felice Bauer, he lived not like a hermit but like a dead man. According to his Diaries, writing was an ordeal that

left empty all those abilities which were directed toward the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions. This was necessary because the

totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively could they even serve the purpose of my writing.

There was never any real question about the value of the work Kafka produced at such cruel cost. Max Brod, Franz Werfel, and other brilliant young Prague literati—as well as the German publishers Kurt Wolff and Ernst Rohwalt—were quick to recognize the uniqueness of his gift. Kafka also knew the value of the writing that expressed "the tremendous world" inside him, and much as he dreamed of a life devoted to such things as gardening, learning foreign languages, playing with children, he did not flinch from duty. He was, however, a pitiless critic of his own writing; censor would be a better word. Of the fiction that is most widely known, only *The Metamorphosis*, *In the Penal Colony*, and collections of stories that included "The Judgment," "The Stoker" (which became the first chapter of the unfinished novel *Amerika*) were published while Kafka was alive. *The Trial* was begun in 1914 and was never finished, although Kafka returned to it over and over, and *The Castle* was written in 1922, when Kafka was already very sick, and likewise was not finished. Kafka gave all the manuscripts in his possession, including those of *The Trial* and *The Castle*, to his closest male friend and future biographer, Max Brod, whom he appointed his executor, with instructions to burn them. Only "The Judgment," "The Stoker," "In The Penal Colony," *The Metamorphosis*, "A Country Doctor," and "A Hunger Artist" were to be spared. A story is told how the distraught Brod wandered through the streets of Prague in the days that followed Kafka's death, stopping acquaintances and asking whether he should carry out Dr. Kafka's wishes. One such acquaintance told him to burn his own papers and save Kafka's. Fortunately, Brod followed the second part of that brutal piece of advice, and not Kafka's expressed wishes. That is how *The Trial* and *The Castle* came to be published in 1925 and 1926, respectively, and Kafka's stamp was impressed on the literature of this century. *Amerika* appeared in 1927. Collections of stories, diaries and correspondence poured out over the succeeding decades.

You might say that the first words I spoke to you opened a parenthesis. I will now close it, and put forward a question.

Why is it that this relatively small, truncated, mostly unfinished, painstakingly edited and reconstructed body of fiction has acted on the imagination of this century with such irresistible force? (According to a scholar writing in 1988, more criticism is published on Kafka each year than on any writer except Shakespeare, and "The Judgment" alone, a story ten pages long, has inspired in the West nearly two hundred known learned commentaries.) Why has the adjective "Kafkaesque" penetrated

the vernacular so deeply, its use being by no means confined to readers of Kafka's fiction? This question also haunted me as I followed a Kafka map of Prague, looking at the houses marked on it where he had lived with his parents, and at the Insurance Institute building that is so much like the bank where Joseph K. worked, and, later, while I took part in a Kafka symposium held in the Café Milena. (Milena Jesenská is the name of another of Kafka's great loves; his letters to her are as remarkable as the best of Kafka's fiction.)

The quality of Kafka's work places him very high in the literary Pantheon but it is not a sufficient reason: for instance, although Kafka's oeuvre is slight in comparison with those of Proust or Joyce, and the world he created is less rich than theirs, the adjectives "Proustian" and "Joycean" do not have the same resonance. Kafka's idols were Dostoevski, Dickens, and Flaubert (he admired *L'Education Sentimentale* more than any other novel), but he lacked the stamina needed to develop and bring to completion narratives on the scale of theirs. *Amerika*, his one attempt in that direction, failed. He was unable to finish it, as he was unable to finish *The Trial* or *The Castle*, both of which involved less ambitious novelistic strategies. I believe that the answer lies in Kafka's having expressed, with an acuteness surpassing any other writer, a personal predicament that corresponds to our *mal du siècle*, the wound of the twentieth-century Western man and of twentieth-century Western society. What is that predicament in terms of Kafka's work?

First of all, a sense of loss: loss of decent community with one's fellow men, loss of the sense of one's own worth, loss of confidence in the proper functioning of institutions and in the rightness of laws, loss of contact with God. The result is the dehumanization of man: his change into "a monstrous vermin," or his dying "like a dog," or the apparition of a dog, or an ape, or a nameless burrowing animal, or a nation of mice as Kafka's protagonists: the exponents of his view of the human condition.

Second, the insertion of man into a claustrophobic and totally cruel world, in which indifference and duplicity are the rule, and brutish sexual attraction and the equally brutish sexual act replace tenderness and love as the principal connection between men and women.

Third, a way of looking at the way we live that is like the image produced by a camera's when the light is too strong, bringing to the foreground everything that should have remained half-obsured, arousing a sense of revulsion mixed with shame.

One should not, therefore, suppose that in his personal life Kafka was a figure of gloom—on the contrary, he seems to have been charming, gay and considerate, a shy but fascinating conversationalist and a gifted mimic—any more than speculate that he had somehow foreseen the frenzy

of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung, or Pol Pot and the ensuing irremediable change in the relation of one human being to another of which Auschwitz has become the symbol. Rather, it so happened that Kafka's extraordinary literary sensibility and intelligence found in the witch's brew of pre-World War Prague the elements necessary for the formation of a vision that turned out to match a reality he did not live long enough to experience.

Kafka was a Jew brought up in the German language and the German educational system. He spent his entire life in Prague at a time when Czech cultural and political nationalism was reaching its boiling point; virulent anti-Semitism was that nationalism's ugly other face. German and Austrian anti-Semitism were also mounting. It had required a *tour de force* to get Kafka hired by the Insurance Institute; normally, it did not employ Jews. Kafka's paternal grandfather had been a Yiddish-speaking kosher butcher in a small village. Kafka's father began as a peddler and became a German-speaking merchant, prosperous enough to be counted as a member of the Jewish middle class in Prague, but less educated and rougher than Prague Jews who were the parents of Kafka's friends. Assimilation was the road to success, and, given the political and economic circumstances, in the generation of Kafka's parents that meant becoming as German as possible in language and culture. Kafka thought that, in his father's case, being a Jew had been reduced to going to the synagogue on the four holiest days of the year. To be sure, the father could find his place in the prayer book, and read out of the Torah when called upon, but for young Kafka that sort of Jewishness was empty to the point of becoming an embarrassment. Later, he understood that his father had remained close enough to the shtetl and the ghetto for certain of such hollow gestures to be a means of keeping alive meaningful memories of a genuine Jewish life. Even so, Kafka believed that for the father social considerations outweighed all others: those visits to the synagogue were an indispensable means of maintaining the father's absolute belief in the correctness of the opinions of a certain Jewish social class to the level of which he had climbed, and his sense of belonging to that class. Further, Kafka wrote and spoke in German—but he felt that his German, quite apart from local deformations, could not rank as real, because he was not himself German. While Kafka spoke Czech better than most German-educated Jews in Prague, it was not a language he could write. The translations by Milena Jesenská into Czech of his stories were the starting point of their love affair: he took great pleasure in reading her excellent Czech, wishing it were in his power to write equally well in that language. He longed for a true mother tongue. How to escape these contradictions? Could it be through the dream of assuming a simple, and humble identity?

In a letter to Milena, he described seeing the Prague Jewish Town Hall packed with Russian Jewish refugees:

all asleep there, one next to the other, they were even sleeping stretched out on chairs, here and there someone coughed or turned over or groped his way carefully through the lines . . . if I'd been given the choice to be what I wanted, then I'd have chosen to be a small Eastern Jewish boy in the corner of the room, without a trace of worry . . . if one is small, if one takes in and judges everything quickly, what can happen to one?

As he admitted in that same letter, nothing is that simple. Not for Kafka, the great master of estrangement, the painter of a desolate landscapes and nameless cities and personages whose names are reduced to initials.

One should be cautious about blaming parents for the nightmares and deformations of geniuses who happen to be their children. Still, the son's perception of how he had been crushed by his robust and vulgar father is so acute that I am disposed to accept the perception itself as a determinative influence on Kafka, however it may have differed from reality. The relationship between the son and the father is the subject of Kafka's "Letter to the Father," a ferocious document, like a lawyer's pleading, more than sixty pages long in manuscript. Kafka gave it to his mother for delivery to the father. He also sent a copy to Milena, telling her it contained everything. "Everything" includes the father's arbitrary edicts and fits of Jehovah-like rage triggered by trivial causes, his gluttony, habits such as cutting his nails at table, and flaunting of his masculinity, for instance when the huge, portly man insisted on undressing in the same swimming club cabin as the skeletal boy, and also the son's admiration for the father's robustness, hunger for life, and shrewd common sense.

The Austro-Hungarian empire, that strangely unreal realm Musil called Kakania, drew on the Bohemian and Moravian middle class for the operation of its vast bureaucracy. Infinitely complicated, slow, and inexorable in its functioning, that bureaucracy was the iron fist in a velvet glove that held together the multi-ethnic empire. Kafka's life span coincided with Austria's ultimate decadence and defeat; like the great Harrow in the Penal Colony, the system broke apart. Kafka was a cog in the Kakanian bureaucratic machine, administering an arcane workmen's compensation system. Some aspects of his activities surely had a comic resemblance to those of the judicial officials in *The Trial* and of the gentlemen who come down to the village from Lord Westwest's castle to settle matters in accordance with incomprehensible principles established by a remote and possibly mad lawmaker.

One supposes that Kafka's feelings about his family life oscillated between dependency and loathing induced by the quotidian realities of the layout of a middle-class dwelling in Prague. In Kafka's case, the family traversed his room on the way to the toilet and the living room. The parents' conjugal bed, with night clothes as a reminder of where one had come from displayed on the pillows, was an object he inescapably encountered on his way. Confinement, overfed bodies, tell-tale noises from the bedroom and the toilet, heavy food and copious drink: Kafka turned early into a compulsive vegetarian, addicted to food fads and diets. The squalor against which Kafka's phobias were to guard him provided the coarse texture of "The Judgment," *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and, of course, *The Metamorphosis*—the lingering acrid smell of rooms that have not been aired.

Prague was a city marked by a profusion of sex for hire: in 1906, it had thirty-five brothels and provided employment for about five hundred full-time and six thousand part-time prostitutes. To them may be added a population of shop girls and chambermaids out for a good time and small gifts. It was normal for men of Kafka's class to make use of all these categories of women, and Kafka was no exception: in someone as delicate as he, these contacts necessarily bred disgust with sex—Kafka wrote that coition was the punishment for marriage. The allure of prostitution resides in the instant availability of women; neither respect nor courtship is required, the romantic veils that mediate between desire and the mechanics of copulation are inexistent. Indeed, disgust with the flesh may become a necessary component of arousal. This phenomenon is replicated both in the rapid, impulsive couplings in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and the deep revulsion that the sixteen-year-old Karl Rossman, the protagonist of *Amerika*, experiences when he is seduced by a housemaid.

In a magnificent letter to Milena, Kafka explained his own ambivalent attitude toward sexuality, the operation of the opposites of *strach* and *touha* (fear and desire), by an anecdote concerning a Prague shop girl with whom he slept twice in a cheap hotel. The first time he is "actually happy, but this happiness came from the fact that I had some peace from the ever-yearning body, and above all it came from the relief that the whole experience hadn't been *more* horrible, *more* obscene." Then it is as though the girl had become his "bitter enemy." "I won't say," he wrote,

that the sole reason for my enmity was the fact (I am sure it wasn't) that at the hotel the girl in all innocence had made a tiny repulsive gesture (not worth mentioning), had uttered a trifling obscenity (not worth mentioning), but the memory remained—I knew at that instant that I would never forget it and simultaneously I knew, or

thought I knew, that this repulsiveness and smut, though outwardly not necessary was inwardly however very necessarily connected with the whole thing, and that just this repulsiveness and obscenity (whose little symptom had only been her tiny gesture, her trifling word) had drawn me with such terrible power into this hotel, which otherwise I would have avoided with all my remaining strength.

These are the materials from which Franz Kafka fashioned Joseph K., the protagonist of *The Trial*: guilty but ignorant of the nature of his crime, caught in the maze of an all powerful but ineffectual court bureaucracy whose servants may whip some human being in the broom closet of a bank, or forget the existence of the accused, himself seeking the intercession of a sluttish house servant or judicial officials' prostitute, briefly but powerfully longing for the favors of a German office employee who lives across the corridor in his rooming house, dying "like a dog" while a window is suddenly lit up and someone who may be a friend watches. In *The Castle*, the protagonist is K. No first name is given. He too appears guilty but he may have been entrapped. He has arrived in the village attached to the castle under false pretenses and yet his arrival appears to have been provoked by a series of errors in the castle administration. K is on a quest: how to make contact with the castle and the castle gentlemen who operate the bureaucracy of the owner. The reason for the quest remains unclear. Perhaps it is simply in the nature of K. to search. In the village, the castle gentlemen behave like habitués of a bordello. The road to them leads through the favor of "their girls." In *The Metamorphosis*, a dutiful son who conforms to the inhuman work routine of a traveling salesman, because he is the sole support of his family, at a point of great fatigue in fact becomes inhuman: he turns into a huge dung beetle. But, as so transformed, he conserves feelings that are more generous and tender than the feelings of his family or the boarders the family takes in to make up for the loss of the income he provided. The island which is the site of the Penal Colony is visited by an explorer whose priggish sense of propriety makes him unwilling to interfere when he is invited to witness an execution by torture of a soldier orderly who fell asleep, while on duty, in the corridor outside his officer's room. The punishment is to be meted out by an exquisitely complex machine, the Harrow: it will take six hours to etch on the orderly's skin with needles and acid the words "Respect your superiors." The victim of the operation isn't told the aphorism that was selected, the point of the punishment being that the words will be revealed by the pain he suffers. In the great short story, "The Burrow," a nameless animal roaming through the corridors of his burrow is assailed by a strange whistling noise. It is the enemy. The animal doesn't know its identity, but he knows that the

struggle will be to the death. Kafka didn't finish that story; probably it was impossible to find an ending.

Kafka's style, that quality that gives writing access to eternity, is ideally suited to twentieth-century sensibility. He is a deadpan realist—with an unequaled eye for the revealing detail. The impossible, the grotesque, and the unbearably cruel are accepted by the reader as a given, because the account is so implacably matter of fact. One cannot get away from Kafka's truth.

Kafka was only twenty-one when he wrote to his friend Oskar Pollok that

it's good when your conscience receives big wounds, because that makes it more sensitive to every twinge. I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us . . . we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.

In the end, the miracle of Kafka's writing is that it reveals all that is most unbearably cruel in man's existence, like a Harrow etching its message on the consciousness of the reader, but it is never nihilistic. Gregor Samsa has been changed into a dung beetle, but, when he hears his sister play the violin, he dreams of recovering his human shape and managing somehow to send her to the conservatory. The eyes of prisoners in *The Metamorphosis* cloud over before the torture ends: enlightenment comes to even the most dull-witted. The dog in "The Investigations," vomiting blood at the end of a long fast, has the vision of a strange, beautiful hound. He hopes the hound will sing. The reply is: "Not yet. But be prepared." Even in *The Trial*, when the clownish executioner twists the knife in Joseph K.'s heart there is the possibility that someone is bearing witness. It is only the *possibility* of hope, as distant as the meaning of the last entry of Kafka's diary, written after "nights, days, incapable of anything but pain":

More and more fearful as I write. It is understandable. Every word twisted in the hands of the spirits—this twist of the hand is their characteristic gesture—becomes a spear turned against the speaker. . . . The only consolation would be: it happens whether you like or no. More than consolation is: You too have weapons.

The weapons of the human heart, if it can be freed, if the axe of a great maker of myths can break through the ice of our indifference and isolation.