

Why Read Kafka?

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WHY READ KAFKA?*

In *The Observer* of Sunday, 23 July 1978, the television critic Clive James produced a splendidly trenchant onslaught on Ken Russell's two-part film about Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the process, he makes the following observation:

Apart from outright hysteria, the highest common factor uniting Ken Russell's films about great art is the way you never get any idea of the great artist sitting down to work. One of the things that make great artists great is their capacity to escape the confines of their personal lives and speak for us all. But in Ken's view a great artist's art is always just his personality intensified. Brave, committed and adventurous though he be, Ken is essentially a scandalmonger.¹

The point Clive James makes is a deeply serious one: that great art has the ability so to objectify and to make public property the particular concerns and idiosyncrasies of the artist that private vision becomes public statement. This is a general principle, of course. But nowhere is it more vigorously at issue than in the case of Franz Kafka. The reason for this is immediately obvious: Kafka's art is undeniably close to the man's own ravaging, indeed pathological, uncertainties. This invites the invocation of that modish and simplistic article of faith which asserts that pathology is somehow more true, more 'authentic', than sanity. Tzvetan Todorov, in his study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, deals sternly with this prevalent heresy. He distinguishes between the fully resonant literary exploration of the fantastic and the compulsive outpourings of the schizophrenic. The crucial difference, he insists, is to be found in the fact that the schizophrenic 'in the place of a common language . . . establishes a "private language" (which of course is a contradiction in terms, and hence an anti-language)'.² From comments Todorov makes in this study, it is clear that he regards Kafka as a major writer, as the user of (public) language, and not as a charismatically pathological figure whose work consists of jottings in an intractably private code. From the sheer volume of secondary literature on Kafka³ one would assume that Todorov is not alone in this view. Yet it is remarkable how often Kafka criticism pursues, in one form or another, a heavily biographical approach. I have no wish to deny that we do owe certain insights to this kind of inquiry; my objection is, however, that such analyses implicitly suggest that the 'private' Kafka must be invoked in order to account for (and redeem, indeed exorcise) the 'public' inscrutability of the works he produced. I would argue that in literary criticism — as in any form of linguistic communication — an unremitting interest in the personality behind the utterance suggests that that utterance has in some way broken down: that when a listener (or reader) elects not to explicate an utterance but to account for it, he is demonstrating the failure of that utterance to work as public communication.

* An earlier (and shorter) version of this paper was published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 46 (1977), pp. 100–109. I am grateful to the University of Toronto Press for giving me permission to reprint the material which first appeared in the pages of that journal. The initial argument also figured in a number of lectures given at universities in the United Kingdom. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues at Sheffield, Edinburgh, Stirling, and St Andrews; their comments and queries have helped me to see more clearly what I was trying to say.

¹ *The Observer*, 23 July 1978, p. 19.

² (Cleveland and London, 1973), p. 146.

³ For a summary of this daunting corpus see Peter U. Beicken, *Franz Kafka: Eine kritische Einführung in die Forschung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), pp. 241 ff.

In this paper I want to examine an obvious test case: the early story *Das Urteil* (written in 1912). The story has particular importance within Kafka's *œuvre* for it marks the breakthrough of his literary creativity. Kafka tells us that the story emerged with the inevitability of a physical birth, that it was a wound opening. Moreover, *Das Urteil* has a manifest closeness to certain facts and circumstances in Kafka's life, above all to the agonizing — and exhaustively documented — triangle of literature, the fiancée, the father. It is because the story is so clearly embedded in Kafka's 'private' agony that virtually all discussion of it has centred in one form or another on the experiences from which it derives. *Das Urteil* is, then, probably the best example of the 'literature as private code' syndrome within Kafka criticism. It is, for example, noteworthy that even a critic such as Erich Heller, for whom Kafka has an almost axiomatic universality, interprets the story in exclusively biographical terms.¹ In one sense, he is being consistent, because he is prepared to assert that the 'private' agony in the *Briefe an Felice* is 'apparently idiosyncratic but in its wider implications touching upon a universal irresolution of the modern sensibility' (Heller, p. 10). One would like a little more analysis of how the 'private' generate 'public' implications — particularly as some of Kafka's 'public' utterances are, according to Heller, inadequate in the precise sense that they succumb to a 'private' pathology. He argues, for example, that *Der Prozeß* 'fails in aesthetic and . . . ethical logic. For a nightmare will not become a novel' (Heller, p. 90). Indeed, it is a work which, in Heller's view, affects the moral and aesthetic sensibility like 'the indiscretion of a sadistically bad dream told in public' (Heller, p. 91). I would suggest that Heller's critical waywardness is symptomatic of a general malaise in Kafka criticism — and that the story *Das Urteil* is the paradigmatic text for our understanding of how this state of affairs should have come about.

The biographical approach to this particular story has been pursued — with a vengeance — by Jürgen Demmer in his recent study, *Franz Kafka: Der Dichter der Selbstreflexion* (Munich, 1973). After reading his study, one can only ask oneself why anyone should bother with Kafka's text. There has, however, been one analysis of the story which does, I think, point the way out of the biographical impasse. J. P. Stern has suggested that what matters about the biographical roots of the story is not the specific experiences themselves, but the fact that Kafka perceived in the workings of his own mind a 'magnificent congruence of all my bad experiences',² and that it was this congruence which allowed Kafka the artist to produce a story which transcends the personal by objectifying it into a human situation 'in which guilt and feeling of guilt are conjoined without being coextensive' (Stern, p. 123). Here surely one senses a commentary that illuminates the public text — Kafka's art — by suggesting how the paranoid dislocations of his imagination became transformed into the over-arching intactness of his lucid, seamless prose.

Das Urteil recounts how one Sunday Georg Bendemann, having completed a somewhat difficult letter to a boyhood friend who now lives in Russia, crosses the corridor and enters his father's room. He informs his father that the letter does, after all, contain the one item of news which may well wound the friend — that

¹ Erich Heller, *Kafka*, Fontana Modern Masters (London, 1974), pp. 15 ff.

² J. P. Stern, 'Franz Kafka's *Das Urteil*: An Interpretation', *GQ*, 45 (1972), 117. Stern is here paraphrasing a remark in Kafka's *Brief an den Vater*.

Georg has recently become engaged. The father initially denies all knowledge of the friend, but then claims him as an ally as he increasingly turns on his son, accusing him of all manner of egocentricity and moral inadequacy, finally condemning him to death by drowning. The son carries out the verdict, throwing himself from a bridge.

The obvious interpretative problem with which the text confronts us is that of psychological causality. Judgement is made, a verdict is pronounced and is acted upon by the victim. We ask ourselves initially what the father condemns the son for (and how substantiated the accusations are). The father accuses Georg of various 'unschöne Dinge' (p. 60)¹ that have occurred since the death of the mother. More specifically, he implies that Georg has been deceiving his father about the friend in Russia, that his relationship to his fiancée is one of crude, almost masturbatory, sexuality, that Georg has gradually usurped the father's role in the business, and that, finally, Georg has been a 'teuflischer Mensch' (p. 67). Any attempt to substantiate these accusations from the text falters sadly. There are hints that could support the accusations, but there is also a good deal of contradictory evidence. Moreover, no greater clarity results if we, the readers, take over the role of judge.² When we inquire into Georg's moral character, we can at best hazard guesses (neglect of the father? a certain self-centredness?), but we cannot possibly arrive at any reliable knowledge of offences sufficient to warrant the ferocity of the father's judgement. We then try another tack and seek to define the character of the two principal actors in the story before us. We ask ourselves, for example, what authority the father possesses which makes his verdict so unassailable. Certain details (the toothless mouth, the soiled linen, the denial of the friend's existence followed by its euphoric acknowledgement, the playing with the son's watch chain) seem to suggest that the old man is senile, that he has no authority or stature. Yet he is capable of great energy, of explosive physical self-assertion as he rounds on his son. None of this amounts to stable evidence. We find ourselves in similarly uncertain territory with Georg himself. The letter to the friend is diffident, solicitous, patronizing; is this bad conscience, or the scrupulousness of someone who wishes not to give pain? We note that Georg reproaches himself with having neglected his father: yet his newly-found concern for the old man sounds uncomfortably like self-aggrandizing charity. We may conjecture a good deal, but nothing emerges that could be objectively commensurate with the finality of the death-sentence. The uncertainty becomes even greater, of course, if we concern ourselves with the other characters who are referred to in the story (the friend, the fiancée, the mother). These characters play a very decisive part in the events before us, but they exist only as (unstable) components within this bitter battle between father and son. We have no access to them independent of the present situation. Indeed, this is the crucial stumbling-block to our interpretative undertaking: we know only the interaction that takes place before us, we have no knowledge that reliably antedates the dizzying confrontation between Georg and his father. All the characters — whether they actually appear in the story or not — are inseparable from the mercurial, unstable situation in which they figure.

¹ References throughout are to Franz Kafka, *Erzählungen*, edited by Max Brod (New York and Frankfurt am Main, 1946).

² This approach is adopted by John Ellis in his *Narration in the German 'Novelle'* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 188 ff.

The more we delve into the story, the more we perceive that we have been tricked. Gradually we notice the narrative sleight-of-hand that is the source of all our difficulties. The narrator opens his story with a sentence that exudes a kind of authority and sovereign assurance: 'Es war an einem Sonntagvormittag im schönsten Frühjahr' (p. 53). Quite apart from any evocation of atmosphere or mood contained here, the first sentence suggests by its very first clause — 'es war an einem Sonntagvormittag' — that the story to be told constitutes a single, known quantity, an 'es' securely possessed by the narrator. The first sentence implicitly activates expectations in the reader which the rest of the narrative will not fulfil. We learn that Georg has just finished a letter, he seals it 'in spielerischer Langsamkeit' (p. 53). The slowness does not, it seems, suggest difficulty or awkwardness, rather ease and relaxation, even exuberance. We are then immediately provided with a lengthy flashback, in which we learn about the friend in Russia, the diffident relations that prevail between him and Georg. Once again, we seem to be in the hands of a reassuring narrative convention, for we are immediately given the 'background' to that letter which has just been completed with such playful leisureliness. We expect, in other words, to gain from the narrator reliable information as to the situation which antedates the beginning of the story. But we are disappointed. The flashback is conditioned by the present situation, indeed by the recollections that fill the mind of an actor in the present drama: 'Er dachte darüber nach, wie dieser Freund, mit seinem Fortkommen zu Hause unzufrieden . . .' (p. 53). Any information we are given is, then, not validated by the voice of narrative authority: it is a *present* version of the past. In this sense, we find ourselves at one remove from the details we are given about the friend. But then, to our surprise, we suddenly are buttonholed — 'Was wollte man einem solchen Manne schreiben, der sich offenbar verrannt hatte, den man bedauern, dem man aber nicht helfen konnte. Sollte man ihm vielleicht raten, wieder nach Hause zu kommen . . . ?' (pp. 53 f.). Are these Georg's thoughts, using the pronoun 'man' to justify his uncertainty in terms of some putative general audience that would share his diffidence? Or is this the narrator asking for our assent to the comprehensibility of these psychological difficulties? We cannot be sure. Moreover, as the flashback continues, it embraces more and more areas of Georg's previous experience — and the information given will become crucial when we attempt to make sense of the father's judgement. But nowhere do we attain clarity. We are, for example, told that since the death of the mother Georg has become much more energetic in his business activities. We look for an explanation of this state of affairs:

vielleicht hatte ihn der Vater bei Lebzeiten der Mutter dadurch, daß er im Geschäft nur seine Ansicht gelten lassen wollte, an einer wirklichen eigenen Tätigkeit gehindert, *vielleicht* war der Vater seit dem Tode der Mutter, trotzdem er noch immer im Geschäft arbeitete, zurückhaltender geworden, *vielleicht* spielten — was *sogar sehr wahrscheinlich* war — glückliche Zufälle eine weit wichtigere Rolle, jedenfalls aber . . . (p. 55, my italics)

The narrator, by the very fact that he immediately raises interpretative issues, seems to encourage us in our quest for understanding. Yet instead of reliable analysis, he simply offers us a barrage of (largely contradictory) conjectures.

It becomes ever more apparent that the narrator himself is tentative rather than forthright in his understanding of the events which he puts before us. We note, for example, that the only narrative comment on the fiancée is that she is a 'Mädchen aus wohlhabender Familie' (p. 56). And when the narrator quotes part of

the actual text of Georg's letter, we read: 'Ich habe mich mit einem Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld verlobt, einem Mädchen aus einer wohlhabenden Familie' (p. 57). The somewhat conventional epithet apparently is employed by both the narrator and the protagonist. The narrator seems incapable of any perception other than that embodied in the present consciousness of the characters. Even passages of apparent narrative evaluation betray an uncertainty that prevents any sense of there being a separate and authoritative perception at work. Georg crosses the corridor and enters his father's room 'in dem er schon seit Monaten nicht gewesen war' (p. 58). Here the narrator reports a fact which seems intrinsically loaded with implication. As though he were particularly aware of the reader's almost instinctive predisposition to interpret, the narrator immediately goes on to deal with the possible implications:

Es bestand auch sonst keine Nötigung dazu, denn er verkehrte mit seinem Vater ständig im Geschäft, das Mittagessen nahmen sie gleichzeitig in einem Speisehaus ein, abends versorgte sich zwar jeder nach Belieben, doch saßen sie dann meistens, wenn nicht Georg, wie es am häufigsten geschah, mit Freunden beisammen war oder jetzt seine Braut besuchte, noch ein Weilchen, jeder mit seiner Zeitung, im gemeinsamen Wohnzimmer. (p. 58)

This is a maddeningly oblique passage. Every assertion is taken back, is qualified — but is yet left standing. Has Georg been neglecting his father? There was, apparently, frequent contact between them during the day. But what sort of contact? They have business dealings with one another, they lunch at the same restaurant (although it is not stated that they lunch *together*). They spend the evenings together (each with his newspaper) — although there are frequent occasions when Georg goes out. So how do we evaluate the relationship between Georg and his father which culminates in the violent struggle chronicled by the story? Are they estranged and, if so, by whose fault? The narrator simply asserts possible readings of their relationship which imply a number of moral conclusions, but each reading serves to countermand the others without ever fully invalidating them.

This process of exploring possible readings will continue throughout the story, and it involves narrator and characters alike. Both Georg and his father will offer conflicting interpretations of their common past. In the last resort, one reading — the father's — will prevail, but without being reliably validated by any agency external to the psychological conflict in which it is embedded. The father is, apparently, 'noch immer ein Riese' (p. 59) for Georg. Yet his stature is not objectively given; it is of the son's own making. Any facts that are mentioned in the course of the battle for domination are not neutral, reliable entities; they are totally coloured by the present context of their usage. The winner is the one whose reading is acknowledged by the other. The father, having denied all knowledge of the friend, now claims him as an ally, and uses him as a stick with which to browbeat the son. Gradually Georg comes to accept this reading of the friend. In one remarkable sentence we see the process clearly at work: 'Georg sah zum Schreckbild seines Vaters auf. Der Petersburger Freund, den der Vater plötzlich so gut kannte, ergriff ihn, wie noch nie' (p. 64). The syntax is the palpable enactment of the battle that is in progress. It is not the friend as such that is a factor in the present confrontation; it is the friend as known, acknowledged, and manipulated by the father who becomes a potent ingredient in the psychological warfare that we are witnessing. Georg is no more capable of resisting this reading of the friend than he is of resisting the father's reading of his (Georg's) business

achievements, of his engagement. The father draws strength from the son's evident incapacity to assert his own (different) reading of the past. When Georg carries out his father's judgement he implicitly recognizes the right of the father to judge: he gives him the authority to destroy. The stature of the father is, in a sense, fictive, for he is only as strong as the son allows him to be strong. When Georg rushes from the room, the father collapses on the bed: the 'giant' owes his dominance to the son's recognition. As Georg carries out the father's verdict, he regresses to childhood. He swings himself over the balustrade of the bridge 'als der ausgezeichnete Turner, der er in seinen Jugendjahren zum Stolz seiner Eltern gewesen war' (p. 67). His last words express total submission to parental authority, by which he cancels out his adult, increasingly self-assertive, life as an aberration: 'Liebe Eltern, ich habe euch doch immer geliebt' (p. 68). The closeness to the parents here amounts to the innocence of dependence, of non-separation from them.

The centre of this story, as the title implies, is the judgement. Indeed, one is tempted to reflect that the title contains an inherent generality: the story is about any and every judgement. What Kafka suggests is that any judgement, any verdict, any exercise of authority is made to work by being recognized and accepted by the victim. There is, in other words, no causality other than that of the characters' own making. On two occasions Georg tries to put a stop to the process which threatens to destroy him:

Georg stand in einem Winkel, möglichst weit vom Vater. Vor einer langen Weile hatte er sich fest entschlossen, alles vollkommen genau zu beobachten, damit er nicht irgendwie auf Umwegen, von hinten her, von oben herab überrascht werden könne. Jetzt erinnerte er sich wieder an den längst vergessenen Entschluß und vergaß ihn, wie man einen kurzen Faden durch ein Nadelöhr zieht. (pp. 64 f.)

And again:

'Sogar im Hemd hat er Taschen!' sagte sich Georg und glaubte, er könne ihn mit dieser Bemerkung in der ganzen Welt unmöglich machen. Nur einen Augenblick dachte er das, denn immerfort vergaß er alles. (p. 66)

The quotations report two moments when Georg tries to recall something that will exorcise the relentlessly growing stature of the father. The exorcism involves a concern with precise factual observation, noting details such as the pockets in the father's shirt. The stature of the father is, as I have suggested above, fictive: it is a metaphor created by the son's perception. The father, in other words, will not be a giant for Georg if the latter can see only the neutral facts before him, if he can make himself look at everything *in detail*, thereby divorcing the actualities from the highly loaded context in which they function.¹ But Georg's attempt to hang on to facts in all their neutrality is simply unworkable. The attempt fails because, as Kafka never tired of showing through his fiction, man cannot just register facts: his act of perception is an act of interpretation, he sees the metaphors of his own making.

We note how monstrously the father plays with metaphor in his mounting stream of accusation. The climax is reached in the summary of the son's moral character which directly precedes the act of judgement: 'Ein unschuldiges Kind warst du ja eigentlich, aber noch eigentlicher warst du ein teuflischer Mensch'

¹ See Martin Greenberg's perceptive discussion of this moment in *The Terror of Art: Kafka and Modern Literature* (London, 1971), p. 49.

(p. 67). As Kobs has rightly pointed out,¹ the adverb 'eigentlich' — 'actually', 'truly', 'essentially' — simply cannot be used, as here, in the comparative. The father's statement shows a wilful playing with categories of essential and more essential truth. The wilfulness derives from the fact that essential truth, in human affairs, is not a stable entity. It is not something given: it is made by man, it is a human construct, a metaphor that involves a going beyond the observable facts of any given situation. One recalls Kafka's short prose text *Auf der Galerie*, in which two different perceptions of the nature of a circus performance conflict in almost exemplary tension. One perception embodies the 'lie' of art, the glossy fiction of the carefully worked-out performance. The other expresses a reading of the performance that shows it to be a brutal — and brutalizing — routine. This perception is couched throughout in the conditional — 'if it were the case that . . .'. At one point, however, the conditional mode gives place to the indicative as the brutally clapping hands are mentioned, hands 'die eigentlich Dampfhämmer sind' (p. 154). What, grammatically, seems like a moment of certainty (in the indicative) is, in fact, anything but a certainty. It is a metaphor, underpinned by the verb 'to be', intensified with the adverb 'eigentlich'. But the hands *are* hands: they are *not* steam hammers. The reading is given full ontological status in that the metaphor is asserted through the verb of being, but this does not make that metaphor more demonstrably true, more verifiable, than are the swirling conjectures in which it is embedded.

This brings us to the heart of Kafka's vision in this story (and in so much of his art), for it suggests the degree to which the interpreting of Kafka is part of his very theme. Reality is, in other words, more than a list of objects present: it is a human category, it is facts interpreted, invested with meaning, with metaphorical significance. To acknowledge as real is to give meaning. Georg will try to observe facts in order to break with that 'reality' that is bent on destroying him. But he cannot — because man cannot withdraw from human reality, cannot put himself outside that complex of recognitions, acknowledgements, and readings that is the habitable universe of shared, reciprocal signification. Josef K. cannot ignore the trial; he will seek to get to the court and to make it acquit him. But thereby he recognizes the right of the court to condemn or to acquit. What he cannot do is to forget the trial, because it is a process he carries around with him, and that process will inevitably merge into a judgement, a verdict, an 'Urteil'. Similarly, K. is incapable of simply walking away from the Castle, however much he may at times sense that the Castle, in its non-metaphorical condition, may simply be a shambles of out-buildings populated by mindless bureaucrats. Theoretically, the possibility of non-recognition, of non-acknowledgement is there. But it is an ungraspable possibility, because it involves a kind of non-participation — a freedom from the pre-conditions of human living — that is intolerable in its iciness.

Kafka's art is a devastating critique of reality as a phenomenological category. Reality does not depend for its workings upon any causality outside its own operation; to give recognition is to receive recognition, to attribute meaning is to receive meaning in one's turn. Even if the meaning is destructive, is a lie, is an obscenity, it is, in Karl Valentin's immortal words — spoken of a pair of spectacles

¹ Jörgen Kobs, *Kafka: Untersuchungen zu Bewußtsein und Sprache seiner Gestalten* (Bad Homburg v.d.H.), 1970, p. 342.

without lenses — ‘better than nothing’. It is the way man, his metaphorical consciousness enshrined in the language he uses, has to live — and die. I would suggest that the generating principle of Kafka’s art is a perception of the ‘recognition principle’ in human affairs. This principle is, I think, at the heart of the three main readings of Kafka’s work (apart from the biographical) which scholarship has given us: the psychological, the sociological, the theological. Common to all three readings is a concern with the workings of authority, and authority is made of processes of acknowledgement and recognition — whether we say that moral categories are produced by libidinal drives as a set of self-imposed (and self-validating) checks and restraints; whether we say that social authority (in the workings of a bureaucracy, for example) is an unending chain of recognitions of competence, whether we say that faith in God is, as it were, the recognition principle writ large.

I argued earlier that Kafka’s skill as narrator resides in his ability to promise an overview without giving it, that he suggests the workings of a stable and knowable causality — yet without possessing the interpretative vantage-point from which to unfold such a causality before us. It is this narrative modality that is so powerful, that implants the wish for meaning while yet withholding unequivocal assent to any one kind of reading. Many Kafka texts are narrated in the third person, and in a tone that breathes a curiously sovereign ludicity. And yet, as Beißner, Walser, Krusche, Corngold, and Steinmetz have shown,¹ that narrative perspective does not represent, cognitively, a superior vantage-point: rather, we have a narrator who knows no more than does his protagonist — we have no reliable flashbacks, no assured anticipation of what is to come. The upshot is a peculiarly disquieting narrative performance. In one sense, the narrator, in terms of his cognitive and interpretative capacity, is coextensive and coterminous with the understanding of the protagonist. But in another sense, however much the narrator may be identifiable with the protagonist, he is not identical with him;² he continues to preside over the world he chronicles in the way that the narrator of nineteenth-century realistic fiction does. It is this dual presence that sets up a contradiction in respect of our reader-expectation. This is why Kafka works so powerfully at every reading. Even when we know the ending of *Der Prozeß*, we still believe, with every fresh attempt, that this time we will get there, this time we will understand. (It is very different from a detective story where one can ruin everything by giving away the ending.) That narrative modality is present in the very first sentence: ‘Jemand mußte Joseph K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.’ We know a fact — that arrest proceedings have occurred. The other two clauses of this sentence deal — very naturally in terms of our reader expectation — with reasons, explanations for that event. But no reasons are forthcoming: only conjecture, conjecture from the narrative voice. The lack

¹ F. Beißner, *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka* (Stuttgart, 1952); M. Walser, *Beschreibung einer Form* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin, 1972); Dietrich Krusche, *Kafka und Kafka-Deutung* (Munich, 1974); S. Corngold, *The Commentators’ Despair: The Interpretation of Kafka’s ‘Metamorphosis’* (Port Washington and London, 1973) and ‘The Hermeneutic of *The Judgment*’ in *The Problem of ‘The Judgment’*, edited by Angel Flores (New York, 1977), pp. 39 ff.; H. Steinmetz, *Suspensive Interpretation: Am Beispiel Franz Kafkas* (Göttingen, 1977).

² I owe this distinction to Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, 1978), p. 112.

of narrative authority in the text means that the reader — like the protagonist — is impelled by his own rage for meaning to create the only authority there is.

In this particular kind of narrative performance, then, is to be found the source of Kafka's ability to play havoc with his readers. To read without interpreting, without receiving meaning from and attributing meaning to the text, is simply not to read. To make Kafka's texts metaphorical (preferably even allegorical) is a basic hermeneutic need — particularly as the dispassionate lucidity of his style, the at times piercing closeness to observable reality, promises a soluble interpretative experience. It means that it is very difficult for the reader to walk away from Kafka — to withdraw into a world of icy isolation from his seductively familiar discourse. Yet the establishment of meaning, the assertion of what Kafka is actually ('eigentlich') about, is the enactment of his art, not its explication. For this reason, so much Kafka criticism has been concerned with 'where Kafka got it from' — rather than with the 'it', whatever its sources and provenance. Such readings are a kind of desperate answer to the texts: a flight into a reassuring causality that antedates the works, an invoking of psychological, sociological, or theological cause-and-effect. So many readings of Kafka stay the wrong side of admitting the truth of his art: that to interpret him is both an overwhelming necessity — and a scandalous act of self-imprisonment whose dire consequences the work itself so devastatingly reveals.

I began by talking about the vagaries of Kafka criticism, and I disparaged those critics who have tried to give us a stable and comprehensive decoding of the texts in terms of a particular extra-literary framework, whether biographical, philosophical, theological, or whatever. Perhaps, then, we should eschew all such forays outside the text. We could recall a remark by Heinz Politzer,¹ and agree that the Kafka text is like the scattering of blots on a page in a Rorschach test: each reader combines the blots into the shape that he wants to see. It sounds a helpful analogy. It would suggest that the true task of Kafka criticism would be simply to describe what is there, to catalogue the blots, to list them — and not to say what they invoke, refer to, suggest, mean. This kind of undertaking has produced some very cogent Kafka studies (by Walser, Krusche, Corngold). It is an utterly cautious, scrupulous, neutral proceeding, profoundly helpful after the effusions of the elaborate myth-builders. Yet there are problems, problems to do with the fact that such analyses simply have too little in common with what it feels like to read Kafka. Such critics remind one of Georg Bendemann, of his resolve 'alles vollkommen genau zu beobachten'. But Georg could not do it. Nor, I think, can the reader of Kafka. The trouble with the Rorschach-test analogy is that words are not the same as blots; words mean something, they refer, they suggest, they intimate. It simply is not enough to say that the Kafka text is, as it were, an intriguing example of *trompe l'œil*: for this is to reduce the Kafka text to inertness, to prevent it from unsettling its reader. Kafka's fiction is not just a linguistic puzzle, a game with its own literariness. It is about a recognizable and extra-literary human situation, and that situation engages us, engages our craving for meaning. Without that situation, we would not, I suspect, even try to understand the text. I am warning,

¹ *Franz Kafka der Künstler* (Gütersloh, 1965), p. 43.

then, against an antiseptic, 'de-constructed' Kafka; just as I am warning against a heavily 'constructed' sociological, Freudian, or ontological version of his art.

One final observation. I began by talking about public and private, by saying that Kafka's finest work crosses the borderline between the two. Is this true of this story, *Das Urteil*? I have tried to suggest that the story is not just about an impenetrable battle between father and son but is about the mechanics of authority and judgement. The story ends: 'In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr' (p. 68). This sentence tells us that life goes on despite Georg's death, that the ordinary commerce of men continues. The word 'Verkehr' has occurred before in the story when Georg's dealings with his father are described: 'denn er verkehrte ständig mit seinem Vater im Geschäft' (p. 58). Perhaps what the story suggests to us is that Georg's bitter struggle with his father is an exceptional — even freakish — version of what is happening all the time, of that 'bridge', that human commerce which is a chain of recognitions, of meanings given and received. Reality is that 'Verkehr' — everywhere, 'unendlich'.

One might recall Brecht's famous aphorism to the effect that realism is not the way real things are but the way things really are. No one converted the devastating implications of that seemingly harmless adverb 'really' — 'wirklich', 'eigentlich' — into the public mode of artistic statement more powerfully than Franz Kafka.

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