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Franz Kafka [奥地利] 弗朗茨·卡夫卡 著

Translated by Anthea Bell



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BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

FRANZ KAFKA is one of the iconic figures of modern world literature. His biography is still obscured by myth and misinformation, yet the plain facts of his life are very ordinary. He was born on 3 July 1883 in Prague, where his parents, Hermann and Julie Kafka, kept a small shop selling fancy goods, umbrellas, and the like. He was the eldest of six children, including two brothers who died in infancy and three sisters who all outlived him. He studied law at university, and after a year of practice started work, first for his local branch of an insurance firm based in Trieste, then after a year for the state-run Workers' Accident Insurance Institute, where his job was not only to handle claims for injury at work but to forestall such accidents by visiting factories and examining their equipment and their safety precautions. In his spare time he was writing prose sketches and stories, which were published in magazines and as small books, beginning with *Meditation* in 1912.

In August 1912 Kafka met Felice Bauer, four years his junior, who was visiting from Berlin, where she worked in a firm making office equipment. Their relationship, including two engagements, was carried on largely by letter (they met only on seventeen occasions, far the longest being a ten-day stay in a hotel in July 1916), and finally ended when in August 1917 Kafka had a haemorrhage which proved tubercular; he had to convalesce in the country, uncertain how much longer he could expect to live. Thereafter brief returns to work alternated with stays in sanatoria until he took early retirement in 1922. In 1919 he was briefly engaged to Julie Wohryzek, a twenty-eight-year-old clerk, but that relationship dissolved after Kafka met the married Milena Polak (née Jesenská), a spirited journalist, unhappy with her neglectful husband. Milena translated some of Kafka's work into Czech. As she lived in Vienna, their meetings were few, and the relationship ended early in 1921. Two years later Kafka at last left Prague and settled in Berlin with Dora Diamant, a young woman who had broken away from her ultra-orthodox Jewish family in Poland (and who later became a noted actress and communist activist). However, the winter of 1923-4, when hyperinflation was at its height, was a bad time to be in Berlin. Kafka's health declined so sharply that, after moving through several clinics and sanatoria around Vienna, he died on 3 June 1924.

The emotional hinterland of these events finds expression in Kafka's letters and diaries, and also—though less directly than is sometimes thought—in his literary work. His difficult relationship with his domineering father has a bearing especially on his early fiction, as well as on the *Letter to his Father*, which should be seen as a literary document rather than a factual record. He suffered also from his mother's emotional remoteness and from the excessive hopes which his parents invested in their only surviving son. His innumerable letters to the highly intelligent, well-read, and capable Felice Bauer bespeak emotional neediness, and a wish to prove himself by marrying, rather than any strong attraction to her as an individual, and he was acutely aware of the conflict between the demands of marriage and the solitude which he required for writing. He records also much self-doubt, feelings of guilt, morbid fantasies of punishment, and concern about his own health. But it is clear from his friends' testimony that he was a charming and witty companion, a sportsman keen on hiking and rowing, and a thoroughly competent and valued colleague at work. He also had a keen social conscience and advanced social views: during the First World War he worked to help refugees and shell-shocked soldiers, and he advocated progressive educational methods which would save children from the stifling influence of their parents.

Kafka's family were Jews with little more than a conventional attachment to Jewish belief and practice. A turning-point in Kafka's life was his encounter with Yiddish-speaking actors from Galicia, from whom he learned about the traditional Jewish culture of Eastern Europe. Gradually he drew closer to the Zionist movement: not to its politics, however, but to its vision of a new social and cultural life for Jews in Palestine. He learnt Hebrew and acquired practical skills such as gardening and carpentry which might be useful if, as they planned, he and Dora Diamant should emigrate to Palestine.

A concern with religious questions runs through Kafka's life and work, but his thought does not correspond closely to any established faith. He had an extensive knowledge of both Judaism and Christianity, and knew also the philosophies of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Late in life, especially after the diagnosis of his illness, he read eclectically and often critically in religious classics: the Old and New Testaments, Kierkegaard, St Augustine, Pascal, the late diaries of the convert Tolstoy, works by Martin Buber, and also extracts from the Talmud.

His religious thought, which finds expression in concise and profound aphorisms, is highly individual, and the religious allusions which haunt his fiction tend to make it more rather than less enigmatic.

During his lifetime Kafka published seven small books, but he left three unfinished novels and a huge mass of notebooks and diaries, which we only possess because his friend Max Brod ignored Kafka's instructions to burn them. They are all written in German, his native language; his Czech was fluent but not flawless. It used to be claimed that Kafka wrote in a version of German called 'Prague German', but in fact, although he uses some expressions characteristic of the South German language area, his style is modelled on that of such classic German writers as Goethe, Kleist, and Stifter.

Though limpid, Kafka's style is also puzzling. He was sharply conscious of the problems of perception, and of the new forms of attention made possible by media such as the photograph and cinema. When he engages in fantasy, his descriptions are often designed to perplex the reader: thus it is difficult to make out what the insect in *The Metamorphosis* actually looks like. He was also fascinated by ambiguity, and often includes in his fiction long arguments in which various interpretations of some puzzling phenomenon are canvassed, or in which the speaker, by faulty logic, contrives to stand an argument on its head. In such passages he favours elaborate sentences, often in indirect speech. Yet Kafka's German, though often complex, is never clumsy. In his fiction, his letters, and his diaries he writes with unflinching grace and economy.

In his lifetime Kafka was not yet a famous author, but neither was he obscure. His books received many complimentary reviews. Prominent writers, such as Robert Musil and Rainer Maria Rilke, admired his work and sought him out. He was also part of a group of Prague writers, including Max Brod, an extremely prolific novelist and essayist, and Franz Werfel, who first attained fame as avant-garde poet and later became an international celebrity through his best-selling novels. During the Third Reich his work was known mainly in the English-speaking world through translations, and, as little was then known about his life or social context, he was seen as the author of universal parables.

Kafka's novels about individuals confronting a powerful but opaque organization—the court or the castle—seemed in the West to be fables of existential uncertainty. In the Eastern bloc, when they became

accessible, they seemed to be prescient explorations of the fate of the individual within a bureaucratic tyranny. Neither approach can be set aside. Both were responding to elements in Kafka's fiction. Kafka worries at universal moral problems of guilt, responsibility, and freedom; and he also examines the mechanisms of power by which authorities can subtly coerce and subjugate the individual, as well as the individual's scope for resisting authority.

Placing Kafka in his historical context brings limited returns. The appeal of his work rests on its universal, parable-like character, and also on its presentation of puzzles without solutions. A narrative presence is generally kept to a minimum. We largely experience what Kafka's protagonist does, without a narrator to guide us. When there is a distinct narrative voice, as sometimes in the later stories, the narrator is himself puzzled by the phenomena he recounts. Kafka's fiction is thus characteristic of modernism in demanding an active reading. The reader is not invited to consume the text passively, but to join actively in the task of puzzling it out, in resisting simple interpretations, and in working, not towards a solution, but towards a fuller experience of the text on each reading.

INTRODUCTION

KAFKA'S last novel centres on a simple and compelling cluster of images. A rural castle, the property of an absent nobleman, is run by an administrative staff who dominate the village beneath the castle. The protagonist, K., coming from outside and ignorant of the village and the castle, has painfully to learn their ways and to discover that, despite all his efforts, he cannot gain access to the castle. So far, this may seem to match the associations of gloom and oppression suggested by the term 'Kafkaesque'. Kafka, however, has much more to offer than the 'Kafkaesque', and if one can put aside such presuppositions, *The Castle* provides many surprising discoveries.

The reader of *The Castle* is likely already to know *The Trial*, and may think that Kafka has simply replaced one opaque, hierarchical authority, the court, with another, the castle.¹ In their texture, however, the two novels differ considerably. In contrast to the anonymous city of *The Trial*, *The Castle* has a vividly presented material and social setting. We are in a remote village, in the depth of winter. The snowbound village is repeatedly evoked: 'more and more little houses, their window-panes covered by frost-flowers', 'a narrow alley where the snow lay even deeper. Pulling his feet out of it as they kept sinking in again was hard work' (p. 13). We feel how exhausting it is to have constantly to struggle through the deep snow. Moreover, the village is a community, with friendships and hatreds that go back through the generations. We learn about the village's two inns, the humble Bridge Inn and the more pretentious Castle Inn, and about how the latter's landlord and landlady acquired it; we meet the families of the tanner Lasemann and the cobbler Brunswick, and hear about their standing in the village; and we are told at great length about the family of Barnabas, the castle messenger, and how the family are in bad odour because of their refractory attitude towards the castle. And whenever a new figure is introduced, he or she is neatly characterized, so that even those who appear briefly—the carter Gerstäcker, the village schoolmaster, the schoolmistress Gisa and her languishing suitor Schwarzer—are vivid presences.

¹ For a detailed comparison, see Richard Sheppard, 'The Trial/The Castle: Towards an Analytical Comparison', in Angel Flores (ed.), *The Kafka Debate* (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), 396-417.

This community is also the setting for a love story. Unlike the callous and self-centred protagonist of *The Trial*, the main character here is at least briefly capable of love, and the rapid development and decline of his love-affair with Frieda has moments of poignancy not found earlier in Kafka's work. These features offset the extensive conversations about the puzzling ways of the castle authorities, which correspond to Kafka's profound concern with ambiguity, but which sometimes make one feel that the novel could have benefited from the work of an editor. Kafka did not complete the novel; like his others, *The Trial* and *The Man Who Disappeared*, it was published after his death by his friend Max Brod.

If we seek access to the novel through Kafka's biography, we shall be disappointed. The snow-covered environment is that of the ski resort of Spindlermühle in the Tatra Mountains, where Kafka stayed in January 1922, while the rural community no doubt reflects his experiences in Zürau, where he stayed on his sister's farm in the winter of 1917-18. The emotional drama goes back, in complex and untraceable ways, to his relationships with the Czech journalist Milena Polak, née Jesenská, and with Julie Wohryzek, his second fiancée. But the isolated setting of the novel, and its quasi-fantastic social system, enable Kafka above all to explore and dramatize some long-standing intellectual preoccupations.

One of these was the idea of a community. Kafka's personal writings constantly express his sense of solitude, his isolation from his family, his need to find a substitute in writing, and his wish to found a community by marrying and starting a family. But, while attracted to the community as an ideal, he was also sharply aware of the frictions arising from living with even one other person. When he and Felice Bauer stayed together in a hotel in the summer of 1916, Kafka recorded in his diary how laborious it was to live together, adding: 'only deep down perhaps a narrow trickle worthy to be called love' (5 July 1916). Integration into a community such as the fictional village would be many degrees harder. Hence K. the outsider is treated with condescension, contempt, and outright dislike by the villagers, and allowed only a marginal place in their community as janitor in the village school. His situation has been compared to that of Jews seeking a place in European society.² But to interpret the novel accordingly would be too narrow.

² See Hannah Arendt, 'The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition', in her *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 69-90.

The novel is also concerned with authority of various kinds. The castle is said to belong to Count Westwest, whom we never see. In his absence the castle is run by a huge staff of bureaucrats, arranged in a hierarchy, who manage the affairs of the village. There is much satire on bureaucratic confusion and inefficiency. But it is also clear that the bureaucrats arrogate to themselves the respect formerly paid to the vanished aristocracy. Kafka was writing just after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires. His novel asks in part what will take the place of traditional authority.

Alongside political power, the castle and its staff receive religious devotion from the villagers. The many religious overtones in the text have sometimes been interpreted as meaning that the castle has an enigmatic religious significance: thus Max Brod called it the abode of divine grace.³ Erich Heller memorably challenged this interpretation by pointing to the misbehaviour of the castle bureaucrats: 'The castle in Kafka's novel is, as it were, the heavily fortified garrison of a company of Gnostic demons, successfully holding an advanced position against the manoeuvres of an impatient soul.'⁴ But this may be both extravagant and misguided. The castle is enigmatic: we cannot tell what power it contains—if any. The image may have been suggested by a passage in Schopenhauer's great philosophical work *The World as Will and Idea*, where Schopenhauer argues that scrutiny of the world can never tell us about the true, inner nature of things: 'we can never arrive at the real nature of things from without. However much we investigate, we can never reach anything but images and names. We are like a man who goes round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance, and sometimes sketching the façades.'⁵

Perhaps the castle contains no secret. It may be more appropriate to see it not as a real spiritual authority, whether benign or malign, but rather as 'the emblem for the modern, secular, post-religious era',⁶ and as the projection of people's desire for a spiritual authority. As in *The Trial*, where we are invited to wonder why Josef K. submits

³ Max Brod, 'Nachwort', in Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß* (Munich: Wolff, 1926), 492–504 (p. 496).

⁴ Erich Heller, 'The World of Franz Kafka', in his *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1951), 157–81 (p. 175).

⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, tr. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 3 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), i. 128.

⁶ Stephen D. Dowden, *Kafka's Castle and the Critical Imagination* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 127.

to the authority of the court, so here Kafka is examining the psychological mechanisms that lead people to believe in a spiritual authority and submit to its demands—demands which are based in their own desires and hopes, and thus ultimately in their own power. Kafka summed up the problem of authority in a little parable written on 2 December 1917:

They were given the choice of being kings or royal messengers. Like children, they all wanted to be messengers. Therefore there are only messengers; they rush through the world, and as there are no kings, they shout their meaningless messages to one another. They would gladly put an end to their wretched condition, but they dare not because of their oath of loyalty.⁷

This closed circle—servitude to an authority that one has oneself created and could in theory destroy—is the condition of the villagers in *The Castle*. K. challenges that authority; he is a land surveyor, whose work consists in rational calculation, and thus a representative of the disenchanting, post-religious modern world. But he is also susceptible to its appeal.

Within Kafka's work, the castle and its hierarchy seem to be an expansion of the legend of the doorkeeper which the chaplain told to Josef K. in *The Trial*. There, a countryman comes to the gate of the Law, as K. comes to the village, and is told by the doorkeeper that he cannot enter yet; the man spends his whole life waiting submissively for permission to enter, only to be told, as he dies, that the entrance was intended specially for him. The doorkeeper resembles the castle official of whom K. sees a portrait soon after his arrival: both have big beards and prominent hooked noses. Both are members of a hierarchy: we hear later in *The Castle* of a warden with several deputy wardens, besides officials and secretaries, while the doorkeeper evokes a series of further doorkeepers and says: 'The sight of just the third is too much even for me.'⁸ A similar phrase occurs in *The Castle*, when the landlady of the Bridge Inn asks K., 'how did you bear the sight of Klamm?' (p. 47). The doorkeeper professes to be 'powerful', and the word is used in a similar undefined way by the landlord, who describes officials, but not K., as 'powerful' (p. 10). K. imagines Klamm's door being guarded by a 'doorkeeper' (p. 108).

⁷ Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1992), Textband, p. 56.

⁸ Kafka, *The Trial*, tr. Mike Mitchell, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154.

The castle is defined by its contrast with a traditional religious building: not with a synagogue, as one might expect given Kafka's increasing consciousness of his Jewish identity, but with a church. As K. looks up at the castle on his first morning in the village, he compares it with the church in his home town:

In his mind, he compared the church tower of his childhood home with the tower up above. The former, tapering into a spire and coming down to a broad, red-tiled roof, was certainly an earthly building—what else can we build on this earth?—but it had been erected for a higher purpose than these huddled, low-built houses and made a clearer statement than the dull, workaday world of this place did. (p. 11)⁹

This passage may be cautiously agnostic, but it concedes that the church spire at least points to some goal beyond ordinary life and has a clarity that stands out from everyday existence. The castle lacks any such clarity. It looks neither like a feudal fortress nor like a modern mansion, but like a collection of two-storey houses. If you had not known it was a castle, you would have taken it for a small town. That implies that prior belief, perhaps the eye of faith, is needed to see it as a castle at all.

In many other ways the castle is ambiguous. When K. first arrives in the village, the castle is invisible, hidden in darkness, without even a glimmer of light showing, and K. gazes up at 'what seemed to be a void' (p. 5). The next day he finds it impossible to get to the castle on foot, because the village street that seems to lead there curves away from it, and the carter Gerstäcker flatly refuses to drive him to the castle. When K. expects the messenger Barnabas to lead him to the castle, Barnabas, having misunderstood K., in fact goes to his own house. Barnabas himself is not sure that the offices in which he is made to hang about are really in the castle, or that the official from whom he receives orders is really his employer Klamm.¹⁰

Klamm too is bewildering. His name—one of the few names in the story that one can interpret with some confidence—suggests the Czech word *klam*, 'illusion'. K. does in fact see Klamm when Frieda encourages him to look through a peephole into the inn room where Klamm is sitting at a table with his beer. Klamm is facing the peephole, as though posing for a photograph, thus affording K. a 'photographic

⁹ See the comments on this passage in Dowden, *Kafka's Castle*, 127.

¹⁰ On the shifting and uncertain nature of the physical world in this novel, see Deirdre Vincent, "'I'm the King of the Castle. . .': Franz Kafka and the Well-tempered Reader", *Modern Language Studies*, 17 (1987), 60–75.

sense of mastery' which is undermined by Klamm's strained and awkward posture.¹¹ In any case, we learn later that Klamm looks different at different times: when entering the village, when leaving it, before and after drinking beer, alone and in conversation; and these differences are not due to magic, but arise 'from the mood of the moment, the degree of excitement, the countless nuances of hope or despair felt by those who are privileged to see Klamm' (p. 156).

Thus Klamm and the castle are the object of intense emotions. The complex emotional appeal of the castle is captured in the sound of the great bell, 'with a lively, cheerful note, although the sound was painful too, and made his heart quail momentarily as if threatened with getting what it vaguely desired' (p. 18). The villagers regard the castle and its officials with reverence. K. is forbidden to utter the name of Count Westwest before children. The landlady of the Bridge Inn, Klamm's ex-lover Gardena, asks him not to mention Klamm by name. The formula 'in the name of Klamm' is used repeatedly to reinforce an order. On seeing a letter from Klamm, the mayor's wife folds her hands as though in prayer.

Communication with the castle is generally misleading. K. telephones the castle, only to learn that what one normally hears at the other end, a humming like children's voices, is the sound of the constant telephoning that goes on *within* the castle. If a human voice answers, it is only a bored official who has lifted the receiver for a joke. Even pictures are untrustworthy: Gardena shows K. a photograph of the messenger who summoned her to Klamm, and at first it seems to show a young man stretched out on a bed, but in fact it shows him in a horizontal position doing the high jump.¹² K. receives two letters from Klamm, both of which are hard to interpret. The first encourages K. by promising to watch over him, but K. learns from the village mayor that the letter has no official status; the second urges him to keep up the good work, and K., interpreting it over-literally, is disappointed because as yet he has done no land-surveying work at all.¹³

Castle officials, like Greek gods, use or abuse their authority to have sexual affairs with village women. Gardena had three encounters

¹¹ Carolin Duttlinger, *Kafka and Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 243.

¹² See *ibid.* 233, for such a photograph: it shows the new high-jumping technique known as the 'Western' or 'Horine' style, developed in 1912.

¹³ See the interpretation of this letter by Richard Sheppard, *On Kafka's Castle: A Study* (London: Croom Helm, 1973), 122.

with Klamm, eighteen years previously, and that experience still dominates her life. Frieda is Klamm's mistress when she meets K., but promptly deserts Klamm for K. Amalia has received a crudely expressed sexual summons from the official Sortini and refused to obey it, which has led the entire village to ostracize her and her family.

K., the outsider, is in some respects free from this superstitious reverence. Although, on his first appearance in the village, he seems not to know about the castle, it appears that he has been summoned as a land surveyor, even though most people think that the castle and its community have no need of a land surveyor. He constantly breaches taboos, especially by demanding an interview with Klamm, the official to whom he is responsible. He is able to endure the sight of Klamm, which the landlady thinks impossible; and he breaks a taboo by being friendly with the Barnabas family, whom the landlady hates.

K.'s attitude is that of a rationalist who is prepared to argue against the unreasoned traditional customs of the village. Thus, when the landlady, Klamm's former lover, insists that a meeting with Klamm is impossible, K. gradually induces her to admit that it is actually possible and even persuades her to help to arrange it, though when agreeing she hides her face as if making 'an indecent remark' (p. 78). K. argues with village officials, including the mayor and the schoolteacher. When he is briefly employed as a school janitor, he resists the schoolteacher's petty tyranny. He refuses to accept his dismissal from the schoolteacher on the perfectly reasonable grounds that the teacher did not appoint him. Later, he refuses to allow the castle secretary Momus to subject him to an interrogation. When he hears about the obscene summons issued by Sortini to Amalia, he asserts that Amalia's father ought to have made an official complaint on her behalf.

To some extent, therefore, K. is a force for sense and enlightenment in a community trapped by its unreasoning reverence for tradition. As a land surveyor, his business is to check and, if necessary, correct the boundaries of people's lands: he might therefore change property relations in the village, and it is hinted that the alleged malcontent Brunswick wanted a land surveyor to be summoned for that reason. The village needs to be liberated. Its material poverty and emotional misery are constantly apparent. K. unkindly throws a snowball at Gerstäcker, and only then becomes aware of 'the man's bent form, as if physically mistreated' (p. 18). The peasants are described

with features 'contorted into an expression of pain', looking as though their skulls had been beaten flat (p. 23). Women, such as the landladies of the two inns, the barmaid Frieda, and the chambermaid Pepi who briefly succeeds her, are prematurely worn out by hard work. Yet the villagers confirm their own subjection by the quasi-religious awe in which they hold castle officials. Hannah Arendt may well have been right when, in 1944, she offered a political reading of *The Castle* in which the villagers, passively dependent on the castle authorities, are confronted by K. who insists on human rights and thus 'reveals himself to be the only one who still grasps, quite simply, what human life on earth is all about'.¹⁴

There are two striking examples of villagers making themselves gratuitously miserable. One is the landlady Gardena, who tells K. her life-story. After being abandoned by Klamm, she found sympathy from Hans, a stable-boy; one day, as the then landlord of the inn saw them sitting in Gardena's father's garden, he stopped and offered to lease his inn to them, whereupon they married, and have been running the business ever since. Since they soon made enough money to buy the inn, they are now prosperous. Yet she would still drop everything and return to Klamm if he gave her a sign. K. chides her, arguing that Klamm actually helped her attain her present situation: it was when abandoned by Klamm that she was ready for Hans, and the prestige of having been Klamm's mistress made her more marriageable: 'The blessing of that lucky star was yours, but they didn't know how to make the most of it' (p. 77). It may be right to see in Gardena's attitude, as Elizabeth Boa does, an implicit critique of the destructive effects of romantic love.¹⁵ If Gardena could have overcome her futile hankering after Klamm, and accepted the limitations of ordinary life, she might have been happy.

The other example of self-induced misery is the Barnabas family. Since Amalia refused Sortini's summons, the family believe they are under a curse; all their neighbours despise and avoid them; they are reduced to poverty; the parents, before being overtaken by premature decrepitude, beg for mercy from the castle and even spend days standing by the roadside in the hope of catching the attention of an

¹⁴ Arendt, 'Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew', in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 94-109 (p. 99); originally published as 'Franz Kafka: A Reevaluation', *Partisan Review*, 11 (1944), 412-22.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Boa, *Kafka: Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 262.