

After kafka

THE INFLUENCE OF KAFKA'S FICTION



Shimon Sandbank

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Kafka's real genius was that he tried something entirely new: he sacrificed truth for the sake of clinging to its transmissibility, its aggadic element.

—Walter Benjamin, letter to Gershom Scholem

I In an essay written on the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin speaks of his stories as "gestic theater," "a code of gestures," so many "acts in the 'Nature Theater of Oklahoma.'" These gestures, he says, "had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset." Instead, "he divests the human gesture of its traditional supports and then has a subject for reflection without end."¹

The same profound insight is then put into other terms: Jewish *Aggadah* versus *Halakhah*. These two terms call for some explanation. They refer to two categories of Jewish rabbinic teaching, usually defined in contradistinction to each other: *Halakhah* as those parts of the Talmud concerned with religious laws and regulations, and *Aggadah* as those sections of the Talmud and Midrash containing "homiletic expositions of the Bible, stories, legends, folklore, anecdotes or maxims."² *Aggadah*, with its predominantly narrative character, is not regarded "as authoritative in the same normative way as the *Halakhah* is obligatory," and Maimonides even says it is "comparable to metaphors of poems."³

To Benjamin, Kafka's parables have "a similar relationship to doctrine as the *Aggadah* does to the *Halakhah*. They are not parables, and yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotations and can be told for purposes of clarification. But do we have the doctrine which Kafka's parables in-

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."⁴

Gestic theater without symbolic meaning and interpretative *Aggadah* without a *Halakhah* to interpret: both metaphors point to what was startlingly new in Kafka. The juxtaposition of elaborate gesture and inaccessible meaning, of minute detail and unknowable whole is the most striking feature of his way of writing: Samsa's metamorphosed body and movement versus the inexplicable metamorphosis itself; or Joseph K.'s wanderings in offices and corridors versus the incomprehensible guilt itself. If movement and gesture were presented as semantically self-sufficient, or, obversely, were their symbolic meaning determinable, there would be nothing new about this way of writing. What makes it entirely new is that it always points to a truth beyond itself but never commits itself to the truth to which it points.

Benjamin's essay thus suggests a radically new concept in Kafka of the very status of fiction. His stories present themselves as interpretations, point to a text beyond them, but are deprived of the doctrine they interpret. They become vehicles without tenor, a secret code whose secret is irrecoverable. Their message being lost—or, as Benjamin suggests, still in the making—they can yield no theme, no idea relatable to the real world.⁵ They are inherently open-ended, fragmentary, and truncated. They are so many pointers to an unknown meaning.

To relate this to some prevalent distinctions⁶ one could perhaps speak of a threefold gap at the center of Kafka's stories: at the level of the events as they appear in the text (what the Russian formalists call the *sjuzet*), at the level of the events in their original "natural" order, before they were artistically shaped into the text, or after being abstracted from it (what formalists call the *fabula*), and, most important, at the level of the theme. A temporary gap at the level of the *sjuzet* is finally filled in, after many arrests and retardations. But the filling proves illusory and the gap is reasserted and finalized. It now turns out to be at the level of the *fabula* itself, a

permanent gap. The absurd nature of the gap, as well as of the story as a whole, makes the reader treat the story as symbolic, makes him want to translate it into another mode. The various clues scattered in the text suggest several possibilities for such translation, but none “seems to encompass everything notable in the semantic universe,”⁷ and each, moreover, is contradicted by some elements in the text. Thus, “we cannot discover a level at which interpretation may rest.”⁸ The text’s enigmatic face requires translation but it defies any accepted doctrine—Christianity, Marxism, psychoanalysis—that would make consistent translation possible. While the gaps at the level of the *sjuzet* and the *fabula* are by no means peculiar to Kafka and can exist, of course, without the gap at the level of the theme, it is this latter gap that is the *differentia specifica* of Kafka’s type of fiction.

To make this clearer let me use the example of *The Castle*. The obvious, though not only, gap at the level of the *sjuzet* is How can one get to the Castle? K.’s many attempts to answer this question constitute the bulk of the novel. Then, toward the end, the secretary Bürgel answers it when he tells K., in chapter 18, that what he ought to do is to surprise an incompetent secretary in the middle of the night. For several reasons to be pointed out later on, this answer is a nonanswer and the gap is finalized and turns out to be at the level of the *fabula* itself. The way to the Castle remains undisclosed, at least to the dominant consciousness, that of K. But the story of a man incapable of getting to a place within a stone’s throw from where he is, is too absurd not to require a symbolic interpretation. We are thus pressed by elements in the text to translate the incidents in terms of our favorite disciplines, concerns, or systems of thought. The inaccessibility of the Castle to K., for example, is translated into the inaccessibility of grace to Everyman, or of the state authorities to the Jew, or of incestuous sex objects to the infant, and so on. Each translation, however, while suggested by certain elements in the text, is contradicted by others. None encompasses everything in the semantic universe of the novel. No thematic extrapolation seems satisfactory. Thus, the crucial gap turns out to exist at the level of the theme itself. The fictive world is divorced from any final meaning in the real world.

At the same time, to present Kafka as a purely self-reflexive writer would be to ignore the obvious metaphysical thrust of his work. The strategy I have described is complicated by the fact that, with all its refusal to commit itself to a theme, Kafka's work is guided by an undeniable metaphysical impulse. Although its truth is "lost," although the themes it evokes—and evades—may be psychological or political no less than metaphysical, its very resistance to a reduction to any one of them is a measure of its holistic, metaphysical drive. Were it not for the fact that the doctrine Kafka was after was the total meaning of existence, the total truth of ontology rather than the partial truths of psychology or ethics or politics, he could have had a doctrine, not only its "relics." The fact that Kafka's stories resist thematic extrapolation is inseparable from the fact that they are metaphysical and concerned with the world as a totality.

Kafka's characters want to see the world as a totality, but this is impossible. Already the Suppliant in Kafka's earliest story, "Description of a Struggle," longs to see things "as they are before they show themselves to him"⁹—to jump out of his consciousness and overcome the partiality of his perspective. But this, as Kafka writes in his diary, is impossible: "Immediate contact with the workaday world deprives me—though inwardly I am as detached as I can be—of the possibility of taking a broad view of matters, just as if I were at the bottom of a ravine, with my head bowed down in addition" (*D* 326).¹⁰ Insisting on taking the broadest view of matters while being aware of its inherent impossibility, and yet opting for literature instead of silence, Kafka, like the king's couriers in one of his aphorisms, must post through the world shouting senseless messages.

As suggested, however, Kafka's novels do contain, toward their ends, a scene in which the gap seems to be filled out and a doctrine found at last. I am referring to the "Nature Theater of Oklahoma" in *America*, the cathedral scene in *The Trial*, and the above-mentioned Bürgel scene in *The Castle*. The first two have the obvious trappings of revelation and a revealed way to salvation. In *America* angels and trumpets and supper in Heaven accompany Karl Rossmann's feeling of being finally accepted. In *The Trial* space and darkness and the priest's roaring voice lead up to what

seems like a holy text, the parable "Before the Law" and its interpreted message. The Bürgel scene is definitely less sublime, but there too an offer is made "to settle the whole affair up there in no time at all" (C 316). Bürgel seems to tell K. at last how to get to the Castle.

But do these three scenes disprove Benjamin's claim that there is no doctrine in Kafka? Do they make thematic extrapolation possible, thus restoring the novels to the status of decodable codes, perhaps even of a Bildungsroman? They do not. It is arguable, indeed, that they exist merely to underline the absence of any final message. They do so in different ways. In the "Nature Theater of Oklahoma" it is the ambiguity of symbols and verbal formulas—angelic and satanic, religious and sacrilegious, real and made of papier-mâché—that creates an unresolvable tension and cancels out the message of acceptance in the very process of stating it. In *The Trial*, the text interpreted—the parable "Before the Law"—is ransacked, in the "exegesis" that follows it, for all contradictory meanings, thus becoming a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire novel, perhaps of Kafka's entire oeuvre, a glaring case of *Aggadah* without *Halakhah*. The conclusions drawn from the parable cancel each other out. "So the door-keeper deluded the man," "so you think the man was not deluded," "the deluded person is really the door-keeper" follow each other (T 237–40), all mere expressions of the "commentator's despair"¹¹ vis-à-vis the "unalterable" text (T 240). The text itself, or rather the law it propounds, is finally said to be "set beyond human judgement." So are the words of the doorkeeper who belongs to the law. "It is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary" is the priest's final caveat (T 243), rejecting all human understanding and ipso facto any understandable message.

Joseph K.'s response, "A melancholy conclusion. It turns lying into a universal principle," is "not his final judgement" (T 243). He must somehow feel that his judgment is wrong, that he has misunderstood the priest's words. It is necessity, not lying, that the priest opposes to truth. A nihilistic conclusion like Joseph K.'s is as false as any other, for it equally applies human judgment to the law, to the ultimate meaning of things. The law is neither truth nor falsehood:

it is the necessity of given facts. Misunderstanding this postulate, Joseph K. finds he is too tired to follow such “unfamiliar” trains of thought. No wonder, for he is asked no more and no less than to give up reason.

Perhaps a reference to a deconstructive treatment of the same parable may throw further light on this point. Jacques Derrida discussed “Before the Law” in a lecture read to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in 1982 and later included, in its original French version, in the institute’s lecture series.¹² If Benjamin speaks of *Aggadah* that has lost the *Halakhah* behind it, implying that they once coexisted, Derrida here claims that law (*loi*) and story (*récit*) *must* exclude each other by definition. The categorical authority of the law requires it to be without history or any derivation that would relativize it. If one insists on telling stories about the law, they must be limited to circumstances, events external to the law, or, at the most, modes of its revelation.

The man from the country in Kafka’s parable is, to Derrida, the story that tries to approach the law, enter into relations with it, enter it and become intrinsic to it—but “none of these can succeed.” The very essence of the law is that it reveals itself by hiding, without saying where it came from or where it is: “Ce qui reste invisible et caché en chaque loi, on peut donc supposer que c’est la loi elle-même.”

Next, an analogy is drawn between the inaccessible law and the inaccessible final meaning of a story, its “unreadability” in Derrida’s parlance: “Ce qui nous tient en arrêt devant la loi, comme l’homme de la campagne, n’est-ce pas aussi ce qui nous paralyse et nous retient devant un récit? . . . D’une certaine manière, *Vor dem Gesetz* est le récit de cette inaccessibilité, de cette inaccessibilité au récit, l’histoire de cette histoire impossible, la carte de ce trajet interdit.” Thus, “Before the Law” becomes an allegory of “unreadability”: it is a story of the way all stories must, according to the deconstructive creed, evade all definite meaning and question their own philosophical claims through their rhetoric.

Toward the end of his lecture Derrida presents another allegorical level when the man from the country, in addition to being the reader vis-à-vis the unreadable text, becomes the text itself vis-à-vis

the "law" or concept of literariness that must always remain obscure: "Le texte de Kafka dit peut-être, aussi, l'être-devant-la loi de tout texte" (p. 187).

What I find rather striking about this deconstructive lecture is its totally nondeconstructive strategy. By turning Kafka's text into a twofold allegory of "unreadability"—the text's unreadability to the reader, literature's unreadability to the text—Derrida makes it very readable indeed. Its presumable message of deconstruction does not apply to itself. It is not at all treated as inaccessible or unreadable, but as brilliantly yielding two or three meanings that coexist peacefully and do not at all subvert one another. Rather than being deconstructed, Kafka's parable is reconstructed as a deconstructionist manifesto.

To find a true deconstruction of "Before the Law," one must look, as we have seen, to Kafka's own text. It is Kafka's priest who does it. Thus, Kafka serves here as a true deconstructor of his text. Derrida makes a point of discussing "Before the Law" as a separate and autonomous text—and so in fact did it appear, in Kafka's own lifetime, among the *Country Doctor* stories. But in the context of the novel it becomes the object of the fascinating process of deconstruction I have described.

The priest's words, "The Scriptures are unalterable and the comments often enough merely express the commentator's despair," could indeed serve as a splendid motto for deconstruction itself. Texts are unalterable, and our interpretations often enough merely express our despair vis-à-vis this fact. If nevertheless Kafka is not a favorite object with Derrida, and if Derrida's treatment of Kafka is not at all deconstructive, this is, paradoxically, because Kafka disarms deconstruction by being his own deconstructor.

But he is his own deconstructor in a different sense from that current among deconstructionists. The latter show "how [a discourse] undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise."¹³ A Kafka text, on the other hand, neither asserts a philosophy nor necessitates an identification of the rhetorical operations that would question it. The questioning in-

stead is openly thematized, incorporated into the plot itself, thus making all definitive assertion of philosophy impossible. Deconstruction, that is, is built into the text itself, not the result of an examination of the hidden implications of its rhetoric. It is plot excluding theme, not language subverting thought.

Thus, Kafka (as well as self-reflexive writers such as Borges or Robbe-Grillet) becomes a problem for deconstruction. He both embodies its strategies and disrupts its conclusions. For, on one hand, his is a shining example of a discourse that rejects all final interpretation. But, on the other hand, by doing the job of deconstruction himself, his presence and voice cannot be said to be irrelevant. It is not the free play of language that disrupts his meanings, but his own explicit skepticism.

II But we must return from this digression to our third pseudorevelatory scene, the Bûrgel episode from *The Castle*. This is the most elaborate example of a self-canceling (or, if you wish, self-deconstructing) message in Kafka. On the face of it, the secretary Bûrgel is at last revealing to K. how to get to the Castle: he must surprise an incompetent secretary in the middle of the night. But this much-coveted message may be said to be deconstructed on four different levels.

First, Bûrgel's speech consists of a long series of contradictions, constantly oscillating between an affirmation of the possibility of exploiting the secretaries' "nocturnal weakness" and its negation. This protracted zigzag¹⁴ ends in a number of violent paradoxes, yoking together possibility and impossibility, making redemption the cause of its own destruction: "There are, of course, opportunities that are, in a manner of speaking, too great to be made use of, there are things that are wrecked on nothing but themselves" (C 255).

Second, the way to the Castle, as suggested by Bûrgel, is unofficial and underhand, both in that the secretary concerned is unqualified to deal with the case, and in that he is approached out of his reception hours. There is no chance of getting to the Castle openly and directly. One must come unannounced, surprise the

wrong official, and exploit his "nocturnal weakness." In this sense Bürgel's entire message of redemption is put in brackets, as it were. It is a second best, whereas the open and official way is excluded *a priori*.

Third, while Bürgel is making his speech, K. is sinking deeper and deeper in sleep. He thus misses the message of redemption. Sleep here, as in Joseph K.'s tired response to the priest and as in many other places in Kafka, stands for the inadequacy of the mind when confronted with that which transcends it. "One's physical energies," says Bürgel, "last only to a certain limit. Who can help the fact that precisely this limit is significant in other ways too?" (C 254). Physical energies include, I suppose, one's mental capacity, which, ironically, ends precisely where redemption begins. Bürgel's message is once again put in brackets: it is placed outside consciousness.

Kafka's fourth and last way of deconstructing Bürgel's message is by making it a mere mirror image of what is going on while the message is being given. For Bürgel suggests that the applicant should surprise an incompetent secretary in the middle of the night, which is precisely what K. has just done: he has surprised an incompetent secretary in the middle of the night. The strict parallelism between Bürgel's message and the actual situation is strongly underlined. Bürgel, for instance, is first entirely hidden under the quilt, then talks about the scared secretary hiding under a quilt; or he talks about the applicant's irresistible fatigue while K. has actually succumbed to sleep. All that his guidance amounts to is thus simply pointing to what is happening: there it is.

It is this last point—the message as a mirror image of the random present—that most richly enacts the peculiar status of Kafka's fiction, the way it both pulls toward, and recoils from, meaning. On one hand, Bürgel's message is that the way to the Castle is any given moment, that salvation is inherent in any random act of living. On the other hand, salvation thus presented loses its very sense: for if salvation means a deliverance from state X and a transition to state Y, it must lose all sense once state X is simply equated with state Y. Bürgel's message is both the most seductive tidings of ubiquitous redemption and a message that there is no message.

III In several very short texts written in Kafka's last years, the divorce between *Aggadah* and *Halakhah*, parable and theme, becomes explicit. In the aphorism referred to above, one of the series Brod entitled "Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way," the king's couriers are said to post through the world and shout to each other their messages, entirely senseless because there are no kings.¹⁵ In "On Parables," a short text from 1922–23, the figurative nature of literary texts is taken for granted: "When the sage says: 'Go over,' he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us" (CS 457). But the truth to which such figurative pronouncements point remains unknown; the "sage" cannot designate it more precisely: "All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already" (ibid.). All parables, all literary texts thus boil down to a single tautology. Never has truth been sacrificed, to use Benjamin's words, in a more absolute sense.

The way the many—one could say endless—attempts at transmitting it must all invariably fail, the way the various comments, to quote the priest once again, only express the commentator's despair in the face of the unalterable Scriptures, is beautifully enacted in an earlier short piece entitled "Prometheus" (1918):

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the mean-

ingless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remained the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable. (CS 432)

The four legends "are," in the present, on paper, but what they "tried" to do was in the past; for it is over, it has failed. They "tried to explain the inexplicable." First they did it most meaningfully, in the religious terms of crime and punishment; a full-blown theology was imposed on the "mass of rock" of being. Then theological certainty began to crumble: the Prometheus who became one with the rock was completely identifying with God's punitive will, but also cunningly trying to escape it. The last two legends are legends of withdrawal from meaning: first forgetting, which may still imply divine forgiveness, then weariness "of the meaningless affair." What a far cry from the aggressive sense making of the first legend!

IV The inexplicable mass of rock that remains in the end is the blank at the center of Kafka, the wall against which all his myths must break. It is the peculiar status of such myths, made only to be unmade, that defines Kafka's type of modernity. His modernity lies in his epistemological position and its formal consequences rather than in what is popularly associated with the Kafkaesque: the thematics of alienation and anxiety, the décor of labyrinthine corridors and offices, the prophecies of totalitarianism.

One cannot doubt the tremendous influence of the Kafkaesque in the latter, popular sense. Kafka's imagery has become the standard imagery of innumerable novels dealing with urban bureaucracy or fascist politics. This adoption of his settings, however, is often only skin deep. His real influence goes deeper and has to do, I believe, with epistemological aspects like those I have outlined.

I call writers who have been somehow touched by this kind of influence post-Kafkan writers. They are post-Kafkan not simply be

cause they come after Kafka, but because this fact is important for understanding their work. They are all concerned in one way or another with the question of truth or theme and its transmissibility through narrative. They can no longer accept the automatic reduction of fiction to themes. They confront a brute and meaningless existence (Sartre) and let human words (Beckett) or objects (Ionesco) proliferate desperately around it. They feel that narrative itself, not only its theme, collapses (Beckett), that only material surfaces remain (Robbe-Grillet). When they cling to a human message, metaphysical (the Americans) or political (British antifascist novels), they must deconstruct it. But they are unable, or unwilling, to write the radically skeptical type of fiction that is Kafka's great contribution to modern literature. They cannot, or will not, bear too much unknowing, the withdrawal from all theme, the renunciation of all reason. They end with some comfort, however paradoxical: Camus's absurd, Borges's illusionistic mysticism, Agnon's Jewish tradition.

But while differing from their great precursor in this respect, their attempts at coping with his influence—with their anxiety of his influence, Harold Bloom would say—have proved highly conducive to the shaping of their own voices. This is “an act of creative correction,”¹⁶ which, to be really fruitful, must always involve a misreading. The following chapters are meant to provide a partial map of some such misreadings.