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FRANZ KAFKA'S LETTER TO HIS FATHER

By Heinz Politzer

AT LONG LAST Max Brod has published Franz Kafka's letter to his father in its entirety.¹ Paradoxically, this autobiographical document of about 15,000 words does not increase our knowledge of the "real" Kafka. Instead, it presents us once more with Kafka's doubts about his own reality. Like Kafka's diaries this letter neither complements nor explains his creative work. It merely adds the mystery of his person to the enigma of his writings, casting, as it were, new twilight on both.²

Kafka wrote this letter in November, 1919, at the age of thirty-six, less than five years before his death and seven years after his *annus mirabilis*, 1912, when he had started work on *America*, and written *Metamorphosis* and *The Judgment*. In these two stories he had raised a father's image to almost Godlike stature: Samsa Senior, who had an inexplicable, yet obvious share in his son's sudden change into an enormous bug and throve on the latter's decline; and Bendemann Senior who, omnipotent and omniscient, sentenced his son to death. In both narrations the father-son relationship is described with much psychoanalytical acidity, increased, almost beyond endurance, by the superhuman dimensions of the father figures.—In the two novel fragments, *The Trial* (begun around 1914) and *The Castle* (begun before 1922), which were published posthumously, the line of paternal ascension rises so high that the father figures vanish into infinity: there is little doubt that the supreme Judge of *The Trial*, and the Master of *The Castle* were meant to represent paternal and divine authority; but they never materialize; and instead there opens, in the presumable place of their appearance, the gap that causes these novels to remain fragments. Obviously, Kafka succeeded here in dissolving any image he had of his father

¹ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß* (New York: Schocken, 1953), pp. 162–223; hereafter cited as *LF*.

² Recent publications have shown that Kafka's "reality" is to be found in the style and structure of his work rather than in the "translation" of his imagery into the language of existing terminologies. Both Friedrich Beissner, *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1952) and Clemens Heselhaus, "Kafkas Erzählformen," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift*, XXVI (1952), 353–76, base their interpretations solidly and successfully on textual analyses. A close co-ordination of textual and philosophical interpretation is also to be found in Erich Heller's *The Disinherited Mind* (Cambridge, England: Bowes, 1952), pp. 157–81, and especially in H. R. Reiss, *Franz Kafka: Eine Betrachtung seines Werkes* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1952) which, by its independent approach, largely supersedes Herbert Tauber's monograph of 1941. —On the other hand, the chapter on Kafka in William Hubben's *Four Prophets of Our Destiny* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 129–44, deals less with Kafka than with the image produced, during the last twenty-five years, by secondary sources. —For a survey of new publications on Kafka see the selected bibliography added to Heselhaus' article, and Heinz Politzer, "Recent Trends in Kafka Criticism," *Books Abroad*, XXVII (1953), 143–44.

into something impalpable, incomprehensible, ineffable. Then he left it to the reader to call this supreme being father, God, or nothing.—However, the letter of 1919 seems to have been written in order to reduce this metaphysical dilemma to a family conflict, and to slip a vast amount of private information into a psychiatrist's hands. What, if not self-castigation, was the meaning of this drastic reduction? Why did Kafka, at that particular moment, embark on an undertaking that was a retrogression on the way that had led him from father towards God? Did he expect any therapeutical effect from this self-analysis? "For the last time psychology!" he cried emphatically in the *Reflections* (1917–19).³ Did he hope to placate the father by it? "Recently," the letter starts, "you asked me why I maintain that I am afraid of you. As usual, I didn't know how to answer you. . . ."⁴ The father's question had arisen from the routine of torment that was inherent in a relationship disturbed from the very outset. There appears no reason why Kafka should have broken this routine—and his silence—to answer a question that had been, beyond any doubt, rhetorical.

In 1919 *The Country Doctor* was published, a collection of stories that contains, in a nutshell, the essence of both *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Kafka himself stressed the importance of this book by dedicating it to his father. To be sure, he had no illusions about the effect that this act of filial devotion would have on the recipient. The letter mentions "your [the father's] welcome that has become famous among us: 'Put it on the bedside table'"⁵ (where, of course, it would be left unopened). Kafka does not refer to this insult as to an individual act of cruelty or "indolence of the heart," but as to an expected reaction, and again, a routine. He does not say that *The Country Doctor* did meet with this specific welcome; he had just been expecting a similar rebuff as inevitable. Nevertheless, he embarked once more on an enterprise the outcome of which he clearly could foresee. Thus the dedication assumes the darker aspects of a provocation. And whatever the father's actual reaction to *The Country Doctor* may have been, we can rest assured that he stuck stubbornly to the established pattern of their relationship, and acted as Franz expected.

Another partial reason that might have aggravated the family situation and touched off the letter can be seen in Kafka's "last intention to marry."⁶ Two years had passed since he had broken his second engagement with Felice Bauer, thus putting an end to a love affair that had lasted since 1912. Now he had proposed to a "Fräulein J. [W.]" in Želisy, the very place where this letter was written. Brod calls the engagement unhappy and short-lived.⁷

³ *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1946), p. 302.

⁴ *LF*, p. 162. This and all other translations not otherwise credited were made by the author of this article.

⁵ *LF*, p. 203.

⁶ *LF*, p. 213.

⁷ *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts (New York: Schocken, 1947), p. 185 (footnote).

But Kafka had not tarried in informing his father about it. A scene ensued which was stormier than any previous one, at least according to the letter writer. At that time the idea of marriage had become for him a matter of principle rather than of love, a step, ever again attempted, but never fully taken, in the direction of good life and integration, of Flaubert's being *dans le vrai*. "To marry, to found a family, to accept all children that are born, to preserve and even guide them a little in this insecure world is, in my opinion, the utmost which a man can possibly achieve."⁸ The "acceptance" ("hinnehmen" = put up with) of children might easily serve as a key to the attitude of this strange suitor who was torn between the extremes of a natural sociability that befits a family father and the ice-cold solitude of the writer, this other "utmost" of a man's achievement. The letter revolves around these two focal points: marrying and writing. But whereas the pain and bliss of writing was an ever present reality for Kafka, marriage was, and remained, a dream wish and an imperative. Therefore the person of the beloved was, in a deeper sense, of little relevance to the writer. "Both girls [Felice Bauer and J. W.] were chosen extremely well, even if by accident."⁹ And the father is reported to have referred to J. W. during the crucial conversation as "just anybody . . . probably she had put on some fancy blouse as Prague Jewesses have a knack of doing, whereupon you, of course, immediately decided to marry her."¹⁰ As usual, the father, arguing in his crude and business-like fashion, hit the son's most vulnerable spot: the self-centered indifference of his life plans. (And he was borne out by reality; this reality to which, alas, womanhood subscribes even in the charismatic presence of genius: in 1920 Kafka was to befriend Milena Jesenská, a Gentile and probably the most intellectual woman of his entourage. The relationship lasted little more than two years and ended in extreme unhappiness.¹¹ Only during his last summer did he meet Dora Dymant, an Eastern European Jewess who was approximately twenty years younger than he. Dora stayed at his side until his death, although both families had opposed their marriage. Undoubtedly, the ironically euphoric happiness of this last union was due to Kafka's acceptance of his own death as something inevitable and imminent.) Taking into account that the idea of marriage had become for Kafka a touchstone of his whole existence, we may see in the engagement controversy with his father another incentive for the composition of this letter.

The letter, which has so often been described as an autobiography, is indeed Kafka's *grand testament*. In September, 1917, his tuberculosis had been diagnosed. Although he was to return to his Prague office for certain stretches of time in 1918 and 1920, he seems to have adjusted to his disease by 1919 at least insofar as it gave him the long desired opportunity of stay-

⁸ *LF*, pp. 209-10.

⁹ *LF*, p. 215.

¹⁰ *LF*, p. 213.

¹¹ Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*, ed. Willy Haas, New York: Schocken, 1952.

ing in the country and concentrating on his writings. In the first diary entry after the decisive consultation in 1917 he had tried to reduce his sickness to a symbol, "a symbol of the infection whose inflammation is called F. [Felice Bauer] and whose depth is its deep justification. . . ." ¹² The letter to his father mentions the "superhuman effort of my desire to marry [that had caused] blood to come out of my lungs." ¹³ Furthermore, art is joined to sickness when the letter shifts to the poor quarters in which he had to live for the sake of his writing: "But also my living in the Schönborn *palais*—which, however, I needed only because I thought I needed it for my writing—may have had sufficient share in it." ¹⁴ (In spite of their palatial name these quarters were no better than his previous ones in the Alchemists' Lane near the Prague Castle which Brod once described as "the monastic cell of a real writer.") ¹⁵

On the surface, then, it is the well-known triad of love, disease, and art that forms the core of Kafka's work and of this letter. To be sure, he owed much of his initial melancholy to the climate of the *fin de siècle*, and especially the Young Vienna school. But soon he developed his thematic material, deepened it by increased introspection and attempted to reach the realm of religion. He succeeded only in the negative: he reached this realm in his despair, in the frustration of his life's plans, and in the fragmentariness of his novels. But in his work proper he never penetrated beyond the inherent ambiguity of literary language that operates with images and symbols. Literature offered him the opportunity of uniting in the *double entendre* of poetic imagery the insights of self-observation with visions of a religious character. Being a genuine writer, he was often able to incorporate this duality in a single phrase, or in one word. His style is simple, and he found in the Muirs adequate translators; yet much of the misunderstanding that he has incurred is due to the double aspect of his very simplest sentences, that defy any literal translation. ¹⁶

A diary entry, about two weeks after the discovery of his disease: "I would put myself in death's hands, though. Remnant of faith. Return to a father. Great day of Atonement." ¹⁷ This statement is the epitome of Kafka's

¹² *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1914–1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Martin Greenberg and Hannah Ahrendt (New York: Schocken, 1949), p. 182.

¹³ *LF*, p. 205.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, p. 156.

¹⁶ See Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths* (New York: Rinehart, 1951), pp. 250 ff. Fromm bases his entire interpretation of *The Trial* on the key word "arrested": "To be arrested can mean to be taken into custody . . . and to be stopped in one's growth and development. . . ." However, the German "verhaftet" has the *double entendre* of "taken into custody" and of "entangled" ("er war seinem Ich verhaftet"). In *The Trial* K. "wird verhaftet"; in Fromm's interpretation he "ist verhaftet." In order to arrive at his interpretation, Fromm has to stretch a half-truth beyond its original meaning. He senses a metaphysical pun but evades an interpretation on the level of existence by embarking on a psychological approach.

¹⁷ *Diaries*, II, 187.

ambiguity. In German, Day of Atonement (“Versöhnungstag”) indicates more than the breast-beating fervor of penitence that it assumes in Jewish liturgy: as soon as the compound word is split up into its composite parts and these are taken literally, they reveal a universal mildness of reconciliation (“Tag der Versöhnung”). Furthermore, the dative “zum Vater” can be read as meaning both the return to a specific father—the physical one—and to a universal and spiritual Father, for instance the one in heaven. The entry seems to be a typical Kafka crossroads where two ways of expression meet for the one moment that is necessary to produce an image. Disease offered him the return to his father’s house as a sick child, a dream that actually came true in 1924. It also offered him a homecoming on the level of Novalis’ equally ambiguous sentence: “Where do we go? Always home.”¹⁸ It is against this ambiguity that the letter to his father—as well as the rest of Kafka’s later writings—must be read.

The bulk of the letter is taken up by a description of his relationship with his father. He was clear-sighted enough to realize that at the roots of the conflict lay the father’s abundance of what he himself was lacking most: vitality. He registers the father’s “strength, health, appetite, vocal power, eloquence, self-satisfaction, superiority in all worldly matters, endurance, presence of mind, knowledge of human nature, a certain largesse, naturally combined with all the weaknesses and failings that go with these merits, weaknesses into which your temperament and sometimes your temper drive you.”¹⁹ This is an adult’s appraisal of another adult’s character; and it may give us a true likeness of Hermann Kafka, a butcher’s son, who had come from the country and made good in Prague. But by a twist closely related to the one that provides the narrations with much of their eerie atmosphere, the letter makes this rather ordinary portrait transparent: it shows the impact of the father on a child that had to bear all by himself the brunt of so strong a personality. (Two older brothers had died as infants; and his oldest sister was six years younger than he.) The letter opens a terrified child’s world to the reader, but it assesses this world with the considerable, though not always correct, psychological insight of a grownup.

True to the pedagogical indifference of the pre-Freudian era, the father had developed a system of double standards: at dinner time the child had to concentrate on his food while the father, a fast eater, cleaned and cut his finger nails, sharpened pencils, and poked in his ears with a toothpick, heaping disgust on disdain and turning the family circle into a kind of middle-class inferno.²⁰ In the sphere of human relations the father was full of a vulgar contempt which was directed especially against his Czech servants and employees (“the paid enemies”²¹). He mistrusted everybody, and

¹⁸ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen, II*, Novalis, *Schriften*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1928), I, 229.

¹⁹ *LF*, pp. 164–65.

²⁰ *LF*, pp. 172–73.

²¹ *LF*, p. 186.

did his best to impart his feelings to his son. He undermined the child's confidence in his environment and, by the same token, raised himself to the stature of a giant. Franz kept wondering how his father managed to preserve his own equilibrium in spite of this display of mistrust, but "perhaps it was really a sovereign's emblem."²² The greatest suffering, perhaps, was inflicted upon the lonely, high-strung, and overly critical child by the father's irrational self-reliance, which removed him from any systematic approach to the arbitrary heights of absolute and infinite power: "Your opinion was right, everybody else's was crazy, extravagant, *meschugge*, not normal. At the same time your self-confidence was so great that there was no need for you to be consistent at all, and yet you were always right. You often even happened to have no opinion whatever on a subject, and therefore any possible opinion on this subject had to be, without exception, wrong."²³ (Here we hear the two Bendemanns arguing with each other in *The Judgment*, or K. proving his point in vain to one of the officials in *The Castle*.) The letter bristles with epithets like "superior," "sovereign," "despotic," and "tyrannical." "In your armchair you ruled the world."²⁴ Thus he attempted to deify the father. Reading the letter one cannot escape the feeling that Kafka, like his Georg Bendemann, would have thrown himself from a bridge had his father so ordained.

The letter reports in greater detail two examples of the pedagogy to which Kafka had been subjected. The first incident happened when he was a very young child. He was lying awake in the middle of the night, and kept crying for water. The grown-up letter writer knows, of course, that the child did not cry because he was thirsty. "Probably I cried partly because I wanted to annoy [you], partly to entertain myself."²⁵ Trying to explain himself, the grownup does not act as the child's older and mature self, he starts staring at himself with the cold and irate eyes of the father whose rest had been disturbed. He ventures into his own unconscious, seemingly to find an excuse for himself; but what he discovers there are not the commonly known psychological mechanisms, but an uncommonly great amount of guilt. He always lay in ambush for his guilt, and when he had trapped it, or, rather, had been trapped by it, he betrayed his original purpose by offering the evidence to his prosecutor instead of his attorney. This is one of the sources of Kafka's bitterly masochistic irony.—The child kept crying; the father resorted to threats, and since these threats, according to pattern, only served to increase the child's forlornness and lament, he took the child out of his bed and carried him into the open air. On a balcony ("Pawlatsche"), he left him standing in his nightshirt, exposed to complete solitude, surrounded by darkness. "For years I was tormented by the thought that the huge man, my father, the last resort and supreme

²² *LF*, p. 196.

²³ *LF*, p. 169.

²⁴ *LF*, *ibid.*

²⁵ *LF*, p. 167.

judge,²⁶ could come, almost without any reason, in the middle of the night, and carry me from my bed to the balcony, and that therefore I was but a nonentity ('ein solches Nichts') in his eyes."²⁷ In this "therefore" originate both Kafka's trauma and Kafka's vision: it turns the clumsy expedient of a pedagogically ignorant father into a verdict of metaphysical depth. (However, he had prepared this verdict by indicting himself through a blatant misreading of his own motives.) This nocturnal experience, this nightmare come true, was a foreboding of the universal night to which Kafka's heroes are exposed, the night that terminates *The Trial* and enwraps *The Castle*: they face the darkness as helplessly and as deeply beset by terror and rebellion as the child once faced the night on the Prague balcony. It is the same anchoring of a metaphysical image in a traumatic childhood experience as the one expressed by Rilke's Christ on the Mount of Olives:

Die Sich-Verlierenden läßt alles los,
und sie sind preisgegeben von den Vätern
und ausgeschlossen aus der Mütter Schoß.²⁸

Rilke's image is of extreme beauty as long as it is considered within the confines of literature; extended into the sphere of religious thinking it comes dangerously near to a sacrilege. Similarly, Kafka's equation:

father = Father = God

is a daring literary venture; but its limits coincide with the limits of literary expression; carried beyond them, it proves no other point than that made by Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*, i.e., the final secularization of religion.

The second episode occurred during Kafka's adolescence, around his sixteenth year. He was taking a walk with his parents when he suddenly started reproaching them that they had left him uninstructed in "those interesting things."²⁹ He went on, boasting of great dangers which he had approached. (He did not say "experienced," for he could not lie even when he was bragging.) Again the letter writer looks for a psychological motivation of the boy's aggression: he had broached the subject because it gave him pleasure ("es machte mir Lust"),³⁰ and also because he wanted to take revenge on his parents, "somehow for something." The father parried the provocation by cutting him short. He said something to the effect that he could counsel him how to carry on "these things" without incurring any

²⁶ The German has simply "die letzte Instanz." "In letzter Instanz" means both "in the last resort" and "without further appeal." In view of *The Trial* it is worth noticing that the term is primarily a legal one.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "Der Ölbaumgarten," *Gesammelte Werke* (Leipzig: Insel, 1927), III, 27.

²⁹ *LF*, p. 211.

³⁰ The usual idiom would have been: "es machte mir Spaß"; by substituting "Lust," Kafka opened, as it were, a linguistic trap door into the psychoanalytical underground.

danger. The curt answer is understandable in view of the father's temperament, his predominantly practical approach, and the general taboo imposed on all things sexual by the European middle class. And yet it disturbed Kafka to such an extent that he could link this scene with the other, when, twenty years later, the father protested against his engagement with J. W. The actual meaning of that never forgotten walk with his parents lies in the fact that then, possibly for the first time, the Oedipus situation had become manifest to him. "The thought that you might have given, before your marriage, similar advice to yourself, was completely inconceivable to me. Thus there was almost no residue of earthly filth on you. And it was just you who, with a few frank words, threw me down into this filth as if it had been my destination." However, the letter writer saw this situation also as an archetypical, almost a mythical one. The meaning of what the father had said was, as he very well knew, "unscrupulous in a very modern way." But behind this façade he sensed "a primeval quality,"³¹ namely the sexual jealousy of a tribal chief or a primitive god. Here he was able to express what he had allowed himself only to intimate in *The Judgment*: that the son's basic guilt consisted in his desire to take a wife, to found a family, and to dispossess the father. Likewise the love scenes in *The Trial*, and *The Castle* are more than neurotic detours from the heroes' path: they are very direct transgressions of the paternal law of the tribunal and the castle's master. (The main attraction the girls have for the hero stems from the fact that they seem to be possessed by and familiar with the law.)

Thus the letter gives the blueprint of the underground foundation upon which Kafka erected his work. That it is a literary rather than a personal document becomes very clear when we observe Kafka using the biographical data of his life to comment upon his writings, and using his writings to comment upon his life. In a sublime play of mystification and ironical self-quotation he deliberately removed the borderline between "truth" and "fiction." At one point he calls the family situation "that terrible *trial* that is pending between you and ourselves."³² Or, more distinctly and more mysteriously, he discusses the "infinite sense of guilt" which his father had instilled in him, and continues: "With this infinity in mind I once wrote about somebody, quite correctly: 'He is afraid that the shame of it will outlive him.'"³³ Here he quotes the last sentence of *The Trial*, which at that time was an unpublished manuscript that Kafka had threatened to destroy. At another point the letter provides us with an astonishingly accurate cosmography of his books by describing the ordeal of Kafka's childhood: through the father's authority "the world was for me divided into three parts: one, where I lived as a slave, subject to laws that had been invented exclusively with me in mind and with which, I don't know

³¹ This, like the preceding quotations, is taken from *LF*, pp. 211-12.

³² *LF*, p. 193.

³³ *LF*, p. 196.

why, I never could comply. Then a second world, infinitely remote from mine, where you lived, occupied with ruling, giving orders, and with the annoyance caused by these orders not being obeyed; and finally a third world where the rest of the people lived happily and free from both orders and obedience."³⁴ This third world is the one whence the explorer comes to the *Penal Colony* and which sends, in glorious indifference, the "unending stream of traffic"³⁵ over the bridge from which the son jumps to his death in *The Judgment*. This world encompasses Kafka's struggle as the reflection of a hope which he knew existed, but did not exist for him. Biographically speaking it was the world of the Czech Gentiles that surrounded the Prague ghetto, the world of the peasants, proletarians, and lower middle-class people who had been born into traditional patterns of community life and community belief which they accepted without further question. (This picture is, of course, highly relative: Kafka knew from firsthand experience that the Czechs were a politically and economically suppressed people before 1918.) It also is the world of Eastern European Jews with whom Kafka had tried to blend so fervently and so fruitlessly (and who had been subjected to pogroms and large scale persecutions throughout their history). Kafka was not blind to the predicament of the inhabitants of this third world. In his novels he saw them living in an intermediary region where they have come to terms with authority, like the courtroom attendants in *The Trial* and the peasants in *The Castle*. They follow a queer logic of their own, but they follow a logic, whereas in Kafka's own fight the law of logic has been suspended, or superseded by the martial law of the paradox. The hope he envisaged for them consisted largely in their non-participation in his conflict. And yet, their very existence at the periphery of his strife-infested world provided him with a certain objectivity. Even in his deadliest moments he was able to look at himself from the outside and to measure his sufferings by the standards of reality, however distorted this reality might have been in his eyes. This double vision led him, as often as not, to the composition of a (seemingly objective) commentary of his books, such as this letter.

In many respects the letter is an attempt at commenting upon Kafka's visions in terms of his psychological experiences. In this attempt he goes so far as to give positive clues to the origin of the novella, *Metamorphosis*, where, in the first sentence, Gregor Samsa finds himself changed into a "gigantic insect."³⁶ It must have been a great temptation for Kafka, the teller of self-destructive parables, to visualize himself in the image of an insect: in his early novel fragment *Wedding Preparations in the Country* (written before 1907),³⁷ Raban, the hero, fancies himself lying in bed,

³⁴ *LF*, p. 173.

³⁵ *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken), p. 63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁷ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, pp. 7-38.

changed into a bug, in order to avoid the disagreeable obligations of society. But the image remained lying dormant until, in 1911, a Yiddish theatrical group came to Prague. One of the members, an actor by the name of Löwy, fascinated Kafka by his vitality as well as by the firm roots he had in the life of the group. He began to identify himself with Löwy who, incidentally, carried his mother's maiden name. The letter records how the father compared the actor, "without knowing him, in a terrible manner, which I have already forgotten [*sic!*], with vermin."³⁸ The father's invective had fallen on fertile and well prepared ground. But it needed the shock of self-cognition to crystallize a literary image around a daydream and an insult. This shock is reflected by the shock technique of the beginning of *Metamorphosis* which is so closely related to the first paragraph of *The Trial*. To a certain extent Kafka is indebted here to Gogol's *Nose*, where Kovalev wakes up to discover that, miraculously enough, he had been deprived of his most cherished possession, his nose. But if, as Vladimir Nabokov has pointed out, his nose had a particularly and grotesquely personal meaning for Gogol,³⁹ then Samsa's metamorphosis served even more as a portentous symbol for Kafka.⁴⁰ The Yiddish actor whom his father had called vermin, represented for him something he had been longing for all along, and something he would never be able to attain: the artist integrated in life, in community life. (See the grim parody of this longing in Kafka's *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk!*) He himself had been offended in Löwy, his own weakness had been discovered and punished by his father's word. In the hour of his defamation Löwy became Kafka, as Kafka became Samsa (even the names are phonetic parallels), who in turn became what the father had called Löwy: an insect. So spellbound was the writer by the abuse that it did not occur to him to specify the kind of vermin into which Gregor had been changed,⁴¹ surely an oversight in view of the magic realism which Kafka used as a style. It is the father whose curse had transformed the son into vermin, the father who thus assumed a godlike power similar to that wielded by Bendemann Senior in *The Judgment*. Hence Samsa Senior's sudden second prime that coincides with Gregor's decline. Simultaneously the father only pronounces a verdict that the son had accepted long before. Toward the end of the letter Kafka has his father sum up the situation in an imaginary speech: "You have indeed got it into your head that you want to live on me altogether. I admit that we fight each other; but there

³⁸ *LF*, p. 171.

³⁹ *Nikolai Gogol* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1944), pp. 4-5.

⁴⁰ The problem of narcissism in Gogol and Kafka has been treated by Robert Mühlher in his *Dichtung der Krise: Mythos und Psychologie in der Dichtung des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wien: Herold, 1951), pp. 438-43. See also: I. F. Perry, "Kafka and Gogol," *German Life and Letters*, N.S., III (1953), 141-45.

⁴¹ German "Ungeziefer" means both the genus of vermin and one (unspecified) insect of this kind ("ein Ungeziefer"). It seems to me, however, that Gregor was changed into a gigantic bedbug, since bedbugs are, in Central and Eastern Europe, the traditional plague of traveling salesmen like Samsa. It stands to reason that the unhappy son had to be transformed into what he dreaded and detested most.

are two kinds of fights: the chivalrous fight, where two independent opponents test their strength against each other; each is left to himself, loses for himself, wins for himself; and the fight of the vermin, which not only bite, but which top the biting by sucking blood to preserve their lives. They are the real professional soldiers, and that is what you are."⁴² By means of his invective the father completed a magic triangle, whose apex was occupied by himself, whereas the basis was determined by the son's guilt feelings and his wishful self-identification with the actor. By that time, however, the real Löwy had lost all importance.—It was the genesis of one of Kafka's images.

Franz Kafka was as little a mental case as he was a pioneer of political or religious thinking (Max Brod).⁴³ He was a writer in his own right, a litterateur if there ever was one. He was infatuated by word images, by their cadence and their ambivalence; and since he was a border case in the literal meaning of the word, given to analytical thinking as well as to vision, a psychologist as well as a mystic, neither of them completely, but able to combine both in his imagery, ambiguity became the very element of his language. By his images he was able to straddle the two realms of his experience: the pseudo-mythical underworld of his childhood where the father held sway, and the pseudo-religious universe of his poetic vision where God reigned in perfect inaccessibility. By its ingrained *double entendre* Kafka's imagery could embrace both the abyss below and the abyss above (which he sometimes, erroneously, called heaven). But as soon as his imagery is interpreted as a vehicle of messages—psychological, theological, moral, or otherwise—the unity of his style is broken asunder, its ambiguity is spoiled, and the only wisdom to be gained is the insight that the incompatible is incompatible.

Thus, if Kafka's father image is different from the one the father-baiting expressionists used to paint, his vision of the Divine is likewise a long way off from any pictorialization of God in the manner of Michelangelo, Blake, or Goethe's "Prologue in Heaven." (That such a pictorialization was still possible in Kafka's own generation and in an atmosphere related to his, can be seen from Franz Werfel's poem "Der göttliche Portier"⁴⁴). Kafka's failure to complete the equation: father = God has to be understood in the terms of his personal history and situation.

Like many a European writer who became articulate between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War, Kafka suffered from the self-hatred of the artist and from an exaggerated envy of the burgher. Like Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger he questioned his own capacity down to the very recesses of vitality and sex, and like Tonio he bestowed his

⁴² *LF*, pp. 221–22.

⁴³ Most pointedly in *Franz Kafkas Glauben und Lehre: Kafka und Tolstoi* (Winterthur: Mondial, 1948), and in *Franz Kafka als wegweisende Gestalt* (St. Gallen: Tschudy, n.d.)

⁴⁴ *Gedichte aus den Jahren 1908–1945* (Los Angeles: Pazifische Presse, 1946), p. 28.

deepest and most secret love upon the robust and the normal, the "seductive banality"⁴⁵ of ordinary life. It was his misfortune that he found the blessings for which he yearned almost exclusively assembled in the person of his father. He was not able to project these wish dreams on any father substitute, nor to free himself from the omnipresence of his creator. Moreover, growing up in Prague as a German Jew, he had no immediate access to any hinterland. He grew up in the "triple ghetto" of Jewish traditionalism, of his family's prosperity, and of the German tongue, which was the language of his books, but not the language spoken in the streets around his father's house. "The German Jew in Czech Prague was, so to speak, an incarnation of strangeness and will-to-be-strange, was the people's enemy without a people of his own."⁴⁶ He had been born into a prison, a prison run and represented by his father; but it was his destiny that he had to search not only for freedom but also for security. He could not leave his father unless he were sure that in the freedom outside he could find a new home, a new fatherland. (Both Franz Werfel and Max Brod, German Jews in Prague and Kafka's contemporaries, succeeded in exchanging the ghetto for a new home: Brod found support in Zionism, and Werfel peace in a highly personal Catholicism.)

Kafka, however, was a radical; no compromise would satisfy him. The home he was looking for had to offer him the opportunity of a settlement not on sufferance but of right, and that in a more spiritual, more social, more human way than he had ever known. In his quest he turned to Christianity: he was an ardent reader of Pascal, but the baroque atmosphere that was so well preserved in Prague that it still permeated the books of Rilke and Werfel, seemed to have disturbed Kafka's austere visions and thought processes: "Pascal arranges everything very tidily before God makes his appearance, but there must be a deeper, uneasier skepticism than that of a man cutting himself to bits with—indeed—wonderful knives, but still with the calm of a butcher. Whence this calm? this confidence with which the knife is wielded? Is God a theatrical triumphal chariot that (granted the toil and despair of the stage hands) is hauled on the stage from afar by ropes?"⁴⁷ In other words, Pascal's religious self-analysis, the genuinely sacrificial character of the *Pensées*, appealed to Kafka, but they did not carry him far enough or, rather, they carried him too far, since they were oriented towards a divine dispensation such as Kafka had never been able to envisage. The central experience of conversion, Pascal's vision of fire, was altogether absent from Kafka's life.—Much has been made of Kafka's relation to Søren Kierkegaard.⁴⁸ But his admiration for the Danish Protestant was for the longest time based on the figurative similarity of his

⁴⁵ *Stories of Three Decades* (New York: Knopf, 1936), p. 108.

⁴⁶ Pavel Eisner, *Franz Kafka and Prague* (New York: Golden Griffin, 1950), pp. 36–37.

⁴⁷ *Diaries*, II, 173.

⁴⁸ Cf. especially Jean Wahl, "Kierkegaard and Kafka," *The Kafka Problem* (New York: New Directions, 1946), pp. 266 ff.

biographical situation and Kierkegaard's. To Kafka the breaking of his engagement with Felice Bauer must have seemed like a re-enactment of Kierkegaard's break with Regina Olsen. Still in 1916 he mentioned Kierkegaard together with Flaubert and Grillparzer (the common denominator being the love life of the three writers), remarking that they at least "knew very clearly how matters stood with them, were men of decision, did not calculate but acted. But in your case—a perpetual succession of calculations, a monstrous four years' up and down."⁴⁹ Although he started to study Kierkegaard more seriously in 1917, he was not able to reconcile the theologically clear-cut "Either-Or" position of the Protestant with his own thinking, which was primarily a thinking in images. Kierkegaard arrived at his paradoxes within the Christian frame of reference; Kafka performed his outside of any frame. "I was not, like Kierkegaard, introduced into life by the hand of Christianity, however heavily this hand might have been descending already; nor did I, like the Zionists, still catch the last corner of the prayer shawl as it flew away from the Jews. I am an end, or a beginning."⁵⁰

The letter to his father explains why Kafka could find hardly more assurance in his native Judaism than he did in Christianity: Pascal and Kierkegaard had at least opened new roads to him, even though he knew that they would not lead him to his destination. But his road to Judaism had been blocked beyond hope by his education. He recalls how he had accompanied his father to the synagogue, four times a year ("I experienced similar boredom, I believe, later on only during my dancing lessons").⁵¹ Liberal Jewish liturgy was for him an ugly form devoid of any content ("the opening of the Ark of the Covenant . . . always reminded me of a shooting range, where there was also a box with a door which opened if you hit the bull's eye, except that there something interesting used to appear, and here were always only the same old dolls with no heads").⁵² Soon the child understood that the only reality which religion held for his father was a social reality, "the opinions of a certain Jewish caste,"⁵³ against which, as a son and later as a writer, he was in constant revolt. Since his father's caste despised Jews from Eastern Europe, he associated with them; first by making friends with the Yiddish theater troupe, then by his union with Dora Dymant whose family was rooted in Eastern Jewish religiosity.

⁴⁹ *Diaries*, II, 165. —Kafka continues: "The comparison with Grillparzer is valid, perhaps, but you don't think Grillparzer a proper one to imitate, do you? an unhappy example whom future generations should thank for having suffered for them." Indeed, the Austrian Grillparzer shows a greater affinity to Kafka than either Flaubert or Kierkegaard. Grillparzer, though still spellbound by Goethe's calm and harmony, heralded that "poetic nihilism" which was to find its climax in Kafka. (Cf. Werner Vordtriede, "Grillparzers Beitrag zum poetischen Nihilismus," *Trivium*, IX, 102–20).

⁵⁰ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, p. 121.

⁵¹ *LF*, p. 198.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *LF*, pp. 199–200.

Since, in his father's hands, Jewish tradition had become an empty shell just strong enough to bar him from the Gentile world, he turned to Jewish tradition, studied Hebrew, and joined, from a safe distance, Max Brod's Zionist aspirations. But far as he may have traveled on this road to Judaism—and he went very far indeed in view of his limited strength and his frustrated life—he only moved a long distance *away* from his origins without ever getting nearer *to* his aim, existential security. This he could have found only in a closed religious system, such a one as Kierkegaard had never lost. He tried to make up in his books for what he had missed in his life: both *The Trial* and *The Castle* are attempts at constructing closed systems: he built pyramids of officials and lawyers and judges and bureaucrats, the secular hierarchy of a broken faith. But precisely because this faith was broken, he could not translate it into the imagery of his books without eliminating the top of these pyramids. There God would have had his seat, if Kafka had ever succeeded in carrying the image of his father up to a sphere not only of wrath but of mercy, a realm not only of despair, but of a "hope beyond hopelessness, the transcendence of despair" (Thomas Mann).⁵⁴ Yet the novels have open endings, and remained fragments.

The Oedipus situation which the letter had described so eloquently had served Kafka as a literary symbol: beyond the father stands a father image upon which Kafka had bestowed enough semblance with Kafka Senior to prevent it from ever becoming God. Any therapeutical intention that this letter might have had can easily be discarded as a mystification. To be sure, it was written, as its last sentence indicates, "to calm both of us down a little, and make life and death a little easier for us."⁵⁵ But this intention is clearly abandoned when, a few sentences earlier, Kafka makes his father say: ". . . by your dishonesty you have already achieved enough, for you have proved three things: firstly, that you are innocent; secondly, that I am guilty; and thirdly, that out of sheer magnificence you are ready not only to forgive me, but, what is much more, and much less, even go further and prove, and try and convince yourself, that I—contrary to the truth, to be sure—am also innocent. . . ."⁵⁶ Here, Kafka's self-reproaches have become aggressions which he attributes to the father. On the level of reality the father would surely have dismissed as extreme nonsense the complexities he was supposed to have uttered. But even on the letter's own level an extreme has been reached: the very idea of guilt and forgiveness upon which the letter is built is being tossed around until it has lost any specific meaning. If it is the privilege—and the basic dubiousness—of modern literature to question by thought and linguistic processes any accepted standards, then a passage like this is apt to question the father-son relationship to a degree where there is nothing left but two masks grinning at each other in

⁵⁴ *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 491.

⁵⁵ *LF*, p. 223.

⁵⁶ *LF*, p. 221.

utter despair: a Kafka commentary on the alienation that governed his life.⁵⁷

Kafka's novels are rich in commentaries whose one and only purpose seems to consist in proving that "the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and that we knew already."⁵⁸ They become part of the fable which they seem to explain; they are not meant to decipher a poetic image by translating it into the language of reason; rather do they stress the fact that the image is untranslatable. The most obvious commentary of this sort occurs in the cathedral scene of *The Trial* where the prison chaplain first shows Joseph K. the mirror of his life in the parable of the man before the law, and then proceeds to add an elaborate exegesis. But this exegesis spins glitteringly around its axis, and is as conducive to the discovery of ultimate truth as one of Alexander Calder's mobiles. It does not show to Joseph K. anything but the depth of the abyss that still, and now more than ever, separates him from the tribunal, "and that he knew already." This letter, too, is such a commentary. Tongue in cheek, Kafka used both the biographical material and the therapeutic intention of the letter to perform one of the strangest and most daring games a writer ever had played with the very substance of his life. By telling his life as a fable and commenting upon it in his peculiar way, he raised his conflict to the level of literature.

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⁵⁷ The letter contains also the following sentences: "I would have been happy to have you as a friend, a boss, an uncle, a grandfather, even (though somewhat more reluctantly) as a father-in-law. Only as a father were you too strong for me. . . ." (*LF*, p. 164). "Basically, you were a kind and soft-hearted man. . . ." (*LF*, p. 166). "You have, I think, a gift for education. . . ." (*LF*, p. 172). "Also you have an especially beautiful and unusual kind of quiet, content, and approving smile, which can make the recipient completely happy. . . ." (*LF*, p. 180). —In Kafka's books these mitigations of the terror inherent in authority are recaptured in scenes like the beginning of the tenth chapter of *The Castle*: there K. receives a letter from Klamm, congratulating him on the work he has done as a land surveyor. (The only semblance of work K. has performed so far was the work of a janitor.) Thus Kafka and his heroes were deprived of the certainty of condemnation, too. For Kafka even the inferno was conditional.

⁵⁸ "On Parables," *The Great Wall of China*, p. 258.