Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus

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The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread. His endings, or his absence of endings, suggest explanations which, however, are not revealed in clear language but, before they seem justified, require that the story be reread from another point of view. Sometimes there is a double possibility of interpretation, whence appears the necessity for two readings. This is what the author wanted. But it would be wrong to try to interpret everything in Kafka in detail.

A symbol is always in general and, however precise its translation, an artist can restore to it only its movement: there is no word-for-word rendering. Moreover, nothing is harder to understand than a symbolic work. A symbol always transcends the one who makes use of it and makes him say in reality more than he is aware of expressing. In this regard, the surest means of getting hold of it is not to provoke it, to begin the work without a preconceived attitude and not to look for its hidden currents. For Kafka in particular it is fair to agree to his rules, to approach the drama through its externals and the novel through its form.

At first glance and for a casual reader, they are disturbing adventures that carry off quaking and dogged characters into pursuit of problems they never formulate. In The Trial, Joseph K. is accused. But he doesn’t know of what. He is doubtless eager to defend himself, but he doesn’t know why. The lawyers find his case difficult. Meanwhile, he does not neglect to love, to eat, or to read his paper. Then he is judged. But the courtroom is very dark. He doesn’t understand much. He merely assumes that he is condemned, but to what he barely wonders. At times he suspects just the same, and he continues living. Some time later two well-dressed and polite gentlemen come to get him and invite him to follow them. Most courteously they lead him into a wretched suburb, put his head on a stone, and slit his throat. Before dying the condemned man says merely: “Like a dog.”

You see that it is hard to speak of a symbol in a tale whose most obvious quality just happens to be naturalness. But naturalness is a hard category to understand. There are works in which the event seems natural to the reader. But there are others (rarer, to be sure) in which the character considers natural what happens to him. By an odd but obvious paradox, the more extraordinary the character’s adventures are, the more noticeable will be the naturalness of the story: it is in proportion to the divergence we feel between the strangeness of a man’s life and the simplicity with which that man accepts it. It seems that this naturalness is Kafka’s.

And, precisely, one is well aware what The Trial means. People have spoken of an image of the human condition. To be sure. Yet it is both simpler and more complex. I mean that the significance of the novel is more particular and more personal to Kafka. To a certain degree, he is the one who does the talking, even though it is me he confesses. He lives and he is condemned. He learns this on the first pages of the novel he is pursuing in this world, and if he tries to cope with this, he nonetheless does so without surprise.

He will never show sufficient astonishment at this lack of astonishment. It is by such contradictions that the first signs of the absurd work are recognized. The mind projects into the concrete its spiritual tragedy. And it can do so solely by means of a perpetual paradox which confers on colors the power to express the void and on daily gestures the strength to translate eternal ambitions.

Likewise, The Castle is perhaps a theology in action, but it is first of all the individual adventure of a soul in quest of its grace, of a man who asks of this

world’s objects their royal secret and of women the signs of the god that sleeps in them. Metamorphosis, in turn, certainly represents the horrible imagery of an ethic of lucidity. But it is also the product of that incalculable amazement man feels at being conscious of the beast he becomes effortlessly.

In this fundamental ambiguity lies Kafka’s secret. These perpetual oscillations between the natural and the extraordinary, the individual and the universal, the tragic and the everyday, the absurd and the logical, are found throughout his work and give it both its resonance and its meaning. These are the paradoxes that must be enumerated, the contradictions that must be strengthened, in order to understand the absurd work.

A symbol, indeed, assumes two planes, two worlds of ideas and sensations, and a dictionary of correspondences between them. This lexicon is the hardest thing to draw up. But awaking to the two worlds brought face to face is tantamount to getting on the trail of their secret relationships. In Kafka these two worlds are that of everyday life on the one hand and, on the other, that of supernatural anxiety.[1] It seems that we are witnessing here an interminable exploitation of Nietzsche’s remark: “Great problems are in the street.”

There is in the human condition (and this is a commonplace of all literatures) a basic absurdity as well as an implacable nobility. The two coincide, as is natural. Both of them are represented, let me repeat, in the ridiculous divorce separating our spiritual excesses and the ephemeral joys of the body. The absurd thing is that it should be the soul of this body which it transcends so inordinately. Whoever would like to represent this absurdity must give it life in a series of parallel contrasts. Thus it is that Kafka expresses tragedy by the everyday and the absurd by the logical.

An actor lends more force to a tragic character the more careful he is not to exaggerate it. If he is moderate, the horror he inspires will be immoderate. In this regard Greek tragedy is rich in lessons. In a tragic work fate always makes itself felt better in the guise of logic and naturalness. CEdipus’s fate is announced in advance. It is decided supernaturally that he will commit the murder and the incest.

The drama’s whole effort is to show the logical system which, from deduction to deduction, will crown the hero’s misfortune. Merely to announce to us that uncommon fate is scarcely horrible, because it is improbable. But if its necessity is demonstrated to us in the framework of everyday life, society, state, familiar emotion, then the horror is hallowed. In that revolt that shakes man and makes him say: “That is not possible,” there is an element of desperate certainty that “that” can be.

This is the whole secret of Greek tragedy, or at least of one of its aspects. For there is another which, by a reverse method, would help us to understand Kafka better. The human heart has a tiresome tendency to label as fate only what crushes it. But happiness likewise, in its way, is without reason, since it is inevitable. Modern man, however, takes the credit for it himself, when he doesn’t fail to recognize it. Much could be said, on the contrary, about the privileged fates of Greek tragedy and those favored in legend who, like Ulysses, in the midst of the worst adventures are saved from themselves. It was not so easy to return to Ithaca.

What must be remembered in any case is that secret complicity that joins the logical and the everyday to the tragic. This is why Samsa, the hero of Metamorphosis, is a traveling salesman. This is why the only thing that disturbs him in the strange adventure that makes a vermin of him is that his boss will be angry at his absence. Legs and feelers grow out on him, his spine arches up, white spots appear on his belly and I shall not say that this does not astonish him, for the effect would be spoiled—but it causes him a “slight annoyance.”

The whole art of Kafka is in that distinction. In his central work, The Castle, the details of everyday life stand out, and yet in that strange novel in which

nothing concludes and everything begins over again, it is the essential adventure of a soul in quest of its grace that is represented. That translation of the problem into action, that coincidence of the general and the particular are recognized likewise in the little artifices that belong to every great creator.

In The Trial the hero might have been named Schmidt or Franz Kafka. But he is named Joseph K. He is not Kafka and yet he is Kafka. He is an average European. He is like everybody else. But he is also the entity K. who is the x of this flesh-and-blood equation.

Likewise, if Kafka wants to express the absurd, he will make use of consistency. You know the story of the crazy man who was fishing in a bathtub. A doctor with ideas as to psychiatric treatments asked him “if they were biting,” to which he received the harsh reply: “Of course not, you fool, since this is a bathtub.” That story belongs to the baroque type. But in it can be grasped quite clearly to what a degree the absurd effect is linked to an excess of logic. Kafka’s world is in truth an indescribable universe in which man allows himself the tormenting luxury of fishing in a bathtub, knowing that nothing will come of it.

Consequently, I recognize here a work that is absurd in its principles. As for The Trial, for instance, I can indeed say that it is a complete success. Flesh wins out.

Nothing is lacking, neither the unexpressed revolt (but it is what is writing), nor lucid and mute despair (but it is what is creating), nor that amazing freedom of manner which the characters of the novel exemplify until their ultimate death.

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Yet this world is not so closed as it seems. Into this universe devoid of progress, Kafka is going to introduce hope in a strange form. In this regard The Trial and The Castle do not follow the same direction. They complement each other. The barely perceptible progression from one to the other represents a tremendous conquest in the realm of evasion. The Trial propounds a problem which The Castle, to a certain degree, solves. The first describes according to a quasi scientific method and without concluding. The second, to a certain degree, explains. The Trial diagnoses, and The Castle imagines a treatment. But the remedy proposed here does not cure. It merely brings the malady back into normal life. It helps to accept it. In a certain sense (let us think of Kierkegaard), it makes people cherish it.

The Land Surveyor K. cannot imagine another anxiety than the one that is tormenting him. The very people around him become attached to that void and that nameless pain, as if suffering assumed in this case a privileged aspect. “How I need you,” Frieda says to K. “How forsaken I feel, since knowing you, when you are not with me.” This subtle remedy that makes us love what crushes us and makes hope spring up in a world without issue, this sudden “leap” through which everything is changed, is the secret of the existential revolution and of The Castle itself.

Few works are more rigorous in their development than The Castle. K. is named Land Surveyor to the Castle and he arrives in the village. But from the village to the Castle it is impossible to communicate. For hundreds of pages K. persists in seeking his way, makes every advance, uses trickery and expedients, never gets angry, and with disconcerting good will tries to assume the duties entrusted to him. Each chapter is a new frustration. And also a new beginning. It is not logic, but consistent method.

The scope of that insistence constitutes the work’s tragic quality. When K. telephones to the Castle, he hears confused, mingled voices, vague laughs, distant invitations. That is enough to feed his hope, like those few signs appearing in summer skies or those evening anticipations which make up our

reason for living. Here is found the secret of the melancholy peculiar to Kafka. The same, in truth, that is found in Proust's work or in the landscape of Plotinus: a nostalgia for a lost paradise. "I become very sad," says Olga, "when Barnabas tells me in the morning that he is going to the Castle: that probably futile trip, that probably wasted day, that probably empty hope."

"Probably"—on this implication Kafka gambles his entire work. But nothing avails; the quest of the eternal here is meticulous. And those inspired automata, Kafka's characters, provide us with a precise image of what we should be if we were deprived of our distractions[2] and utterly consigned to the humiliations of the divine.

In The Castle that surrender to the everyday becomes an ethic. The great hope of K. is to get the Castle to adopt him. Unable to achieve this alone, his whole effort is to deserve this favor by becoming an inhabitant of the village, by losing the status of foreigner that everyone makes him feel. What he wants is an occupation, a home, the life of a healthy, normal man. He can't stand his madness any longer. He wants to be reasonable. He wants to cast off the peculiar curse that makes him a stranger to the village.

The episode of Frieda is significant in this regard. If he takes as his mistress this woman who has known one of the Castle's officials, this is because of her past. He derives from her something that transcends him while being aware of what makes her forever unworthy of the Castle.

This makes one think of Kierkegaard's strange love for Regina Olsen. In certain men, the fire of eternity consuming them is great enough for them to burn in it the very heart of those closest to them. The fatal mistake that consists in giving to God what is not God's is likewise the subject of this episode of The Castle. But for Kafka it seems that this is not a mistake. It is a doctrine and a "leap." There is nothing that is not God's.

Even more significant is the fact that the Land Surveyor breaks with Frieda in order to go toward the Barnabas sisters. For the Barnabas family is the only one in the village that is utterly forsaken by the Castle and by the village itself. Amalia, the elder sister, has rejected the shameful propositions made her by one of the Castle's officials.

The immoral curse that followed has forever cast her out from the love of God. Being incapable of losing one's honor for God amounts to making oneself unworthy of his grace. You recognize a theme familiar to existential philosophy: truth contrary to morality. At this point things are far-reaching.

For the path pursued by Kafka's hero from Frieda to the Barnabas sisters is the very one that leads from trusting love to the deification of the absurd. Here again Kafka's thought runs parallel to Kierkegaard. It is not surprising that the "Barnabas story" is placed at the end of the book. The Land Surveyor's last attempt is to recapture God through what negates him, to recognize him, not according to our categories of goodness and beauty, but behind the empty and hideous aspects of his indifference, of his injustice, and of his hatred.

That stranger who asks the Castle to adopt him is at the end of his voyage a little more exiled because this time he is unfaithful to himself, forsaking morality, logic, and intellectual truths in order to try to enter, endowed solely with his mad hope, the desert of divine grace.[3]

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The word "hope" used here is not ridiculous. On the contrary, the more tragic the condition described by Kafka, the firmer and more aggressive that hope becomes. The more truly absurd The Trial is, the more moving and illegitimate the impassioned "leap" of The Castle seems. But we find here again in a pure state the paradox of existential thought as it is expressed, for instance, by Kierkegaard: "Earthly hope must be killed; only then can one be saved by true

hope," [4] which can be translated: "One has to have written The Trial to undertake The Castle."
Most of those who have spoken of Kafka have indeed defined his work as a desperate cry with no recourse left to man. But this calls for review. There is hope and hope.

To me the optimistic work of Henri Bordeaux seems peculiarly discouraging. This is because it has nothing for the discriminating. Malraux's thought, on the other hand, is always bracing. But in these two cases neither the same hope nor the same despair is at issue. I see merely that the absurd work itself may lead to the infidelity I want to avoid. The work which was but an ineffectual repetition of a sterile condition, a lucid glorification ol the ephemeral, becomes here a cradle of illusions. It explains, it gives a shape to hope. The creator can no longer divorce himself from it. It is not the tragic game it was to be. It gives a meaning to the author's life.

It is strange in any case that works of related inspiration like those of Kafka, Kierkegaard, or Chestov—those, in short, of existential novelists and philosophers completely oriented toward the Absurd and its consequences—should in the long run lead to that tremendous cry of hope.

They embrace the God that consumes them. It is through humility that hope enters in. For the absurd of this existence assures them a little more of supernatural reality. If the course of this life leads to God, there is an outcome after all. And the perseverance, the insistence with which Kierkegaard, Chestov, and Kafka's heroes repeat their itineraries are a special warrant of the uplifting power of that certainty.[5]

Kafka refuses his god moral nobility, evidence, virtue, coherence, but only the better to fall into his arms. The absurd is recognized, accepted, and man is resigned to it, but from then on we know that it has ceased to be the absurd. Within the limits of the human condition, what greater hope than the hope that allows an escape from that condition? As I see once more, existential thought in this regard (and contrary to current opinion) is steeped in a vast hope.

The very hope which at the time of early Christianity and the spreading of the good news inflamed the ancient world. But in that leap that characterizes all existential thought, in that insistence, in that surveying of a divinity devoid of surface, how can one fail to see the mark of a lucidity that repudiates itself?

It is merely claimed that this is pride abdicating to save itself. Such a repudiation would be fecund. But this does not change that. The moral value of lucidity cannot be diminished in my eyes by calling it sterile like all pride. For a truth also, by its very definition, is sterile. All facts are. In a world where everything is given and nothing is explained, the fecundity of a value or of a metaphysic is a notion devoid of meaning.

In any case, you see here in what tradition of thought Kafka's work takes its place. It would indeed be intelligent to consider as inevitable the progression leading from The Trial to The Castle. Joseph K. and the Land Surveyor K. are merely two poles that attract Kafka.[6] I shall speak like him and say that his work is probably not absurd. But that should not deter us from seeing its nobility and universality. They come from the fact that he managed to represent so fully the everyday passage from hope to grief and from desperate wisdom to intentional blindness.

His work is universal (a really absurd work is not universal) to the extent to which it represents the emotionally moving face of man fleeing humanity, deriving from his contradictions reasons for believing, reasons for hoping from his fecund despairs, and calling life his terrifying apprenticeship in death. It is universal because its inspiration is religious. As in all religions, man is freed of the weight of his own life. But if I know that, if I can even admire it, I also know that I am not seeking what is universal, but what is true. The

two may well not coincide.

This particular view will be better understood if I say that truly hopeless thought just happens to be defined by the opposite criteria and that the tragic work might be the work that, after all future hope is exiled, describes the life of a happy man. The more exciting life is, the more absurd is the idea of losing it. This is perhaps the secret of that proud aridity felt in Nietzsche's work. In this connection, Nietzsche appears to be the only artist to have derived the extreme consequences of an aesthetic of the Absurd, inasmuch as his final message lies in a sterile and conquering lucidity and an obstinate negation of any supernatural consolation.

The preceding should nevertheless suffice to bring out the capital importance of Kafka in the framework of this essay. Here we are carried to the confines of human thought. In the fullest sense of the word, it can be said that everything in that work is essential. In any case, it propounds the absurd problem altogether. If one wants to compare these conclusions with our initial remarks, the content with the form, the secret meaning of The Castle with the natural art in which it is molded, K.'s passionate, proud quest with the everyday setting against which it takes place, then one will realize what may be its greatness.

For if nostalgia is the mark of the human, perhaps no one has given such flesh and volume to these phantoms of regret. But at the same time will be sensed what exceptional nobility the absurd work calls for, which is perhaps not found here. If the nature of art is to bind the general to the particular, ephemeral eternity of a drop of water to the play of its lights, it is even truer to judge the greatness of the absurd writer by the distance he is able to introduce between these two worlds. His secret consists in being able to find the exact point where they meet in their greatest disproportion.

And, to tell the truth, this geometrical locus of man and the inhuman is seen everywhere by the pure in heart. If Faust and Don Quixote are eminent creations of art, this is because of the immeasurable nobilities they point out to us with their earthly hands. Yet a moment always comes when the mind negates the truths that those hands can touch. A moment comes when the creation ceases to be taken tragically; it is merely taken seriously. Then man is concerned with hope. But that is not his business. His business is to turn away from subterfuge. Yet this is just what I find at the conclusion of the vehement proceedings Kafka institutes against the whole universe. His unbelievable verdict is this hideous and upsetting world in which the very moles dare to hope.[7]

Note

[1] It is worth noting that the works of Kafka can quite as legitimately be interpreted in the sense of a social criticism (for instance in The Trial). It is probable, moreover, that there is no need to choose. Both interpretations are good. In absurd terms, as we have seen, revolt against men is also directed against God: great revolutions are always metaphysical.
[2] In The Castle it seems that "distractions" in the Pascalian sense are represented by the assistants who "distract" K. from his anxiety. If Frieda eventually becomes the mistress of one of the assistants, this is because she prefers the stage setting to truth, everyday life to shared anguish.
[3] This is obviously true only of the unfinished version of The Castle that Kafka left us. But it is doubtful that the writer would have destroyed in the last chapters his novel's unity of tone.
[4] Purity of heart.
[5] The only character without hope in The Castle is Amalia. She is the one with whom the Land Surveyor is most violently contrasted.
[6] On the two aspects of Kafka's thought, compare "In the Penal Colony," published by the Cahiers du Sud (and in America by Partisan Review— translator's note): "Guilt ['of man' is understood] is never doubtful" and a fragment of The Castle (Momus's report): "The guilt of the Land Surveyor K. is hard to

establish.”
[7] What is offered above is obviously an interpretation of Kafka’s work. But it is only fair to add that nothing prevents its being considered, aside from any interpretation, from a purely aesthetic point of view. For instance, B. Groethuysen in his remarkable preface to The Trial limits himself, more wisely than we, to following merely the painful fancies of what he calls, most strikingly, a daydreamer. It is the fate and perhaps the greatness of that work that it offers everything and confirms nothing.

The end