

SOME NOTES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF KAFKA

My pre-occupation with portraying my dream-like inner life has relegated everything else to a secondary position and it is all embittered in the most dreadful fashion, and never stops embittering me. Nothing else can ever make me happy. (Kafka, quoted in Brod: *Franz Kafka*).

The category of holiness (and not really that of literature) is the only right category under which Kafka's life and work can be judged. (Brod: *Franz Kafka*).¹

IT is obvious that Kafka is a 'difficult' writer; his work demands the closest attention before any kind of account of it is possible. Attention involves looking *at*, not looking *for*, and the inherent danger and temptation in Kafka criticism are to look for 'clues' and 'keys', or to fix all one's attention on some particular subjective element in his work, and to offer an account of that as a substitute for a criticism of the artistic whole. Ideally, of course, the Kafka reader should be a philosopher, a psychologist, a student of comparative religion, and a literary critic, all rolled into one. In practice, however, such an ideal combination is rarely found, and in practice, too, it must be admitted that the critic or reader who does not possess any specialist qualifications is very limited in the range of his discussion of Kafka. The general reader does need help from the specialist, but the specialists who are not prepared to involve themselves in literary judgments must be prepared to offer their findings as footnotes to the study of Kafka, and not as in any way final judgments on his work. Discussions of Kafka in terms of 'existentialism', anthroposophy, or obsessional neuroses, are only discussions of part of the subject-matter of Kafka's experience, they are only mere aids to the discussion of Kafka as a novelist.

The specialist who fails to ignore the limitations of his study, who attempts to offer his explanations as the explanations of the whole of Kafka, and who attempts to evaluate Kafka's work in the terms of a non-literary science, is permitting himself a liberty which only impairs the value of his own specialist study. As an example of psycho-analysis run riot, we quote the following remarks on *The Castle*:

¹ *Franz Kafka: A Biography* by Max Brod, trans. G. H. Roberts. Secker and Warburg. 1947. p. 76 and p. 41. The publishers seem somewhat apologetic for this excellent and valuable work. The dust-wrapper says: 'The biography is by no means perfect. It shows signs of having been written at too great speed and suffers from an obvious lack of revision'. The only thing showing signs of speed and lack of revision is the translation.

'Actually, the Castle was a "wretched looking town"', which as any Freudian would hungrily agree, means the mother. And K. is not really at the end of his journey. In most myths the hero travels westwards, like the sun or Hercules, is embraced by the mother and carried under the sea to the East, where he is reborn. We find K. in the village of the Count West-west (another instance of the town as maternal symbol) and the book deals with his adventures from that point'.² In the present essay we shall attempt to keep extra-literary considerations, for which we have no specialist qualifications, within the bounds of a central literary judgment.

No discussion of Kafka can get far without mention of his use of symbolism. A common mythology, such as that possessed by Europe in the time of Dante or even of Bunyan, consists of a series of points of historical time inseparably linked with religious belief. It can provide a common ground between writer and reader, something that can be referred back to, or taken for granted. But in Kafka there is no question of common ground between himself and his reader. With Kafka symbolism is not a particular means of saying something, but rather of registering something unsayable. The nearest parallel in English literature to Kafka's method is that of Melville in *Moby Dick*. Both are attempting to pin down something that they find impossible to put into words. To put it rather baldly, *Moby Dick* is an attempt to give body to a 'Lear'-experience, where Kafka's *Amerika*, for example, tries to give body to a 'Coriolanus'-experience—the modern consciousness confronted with the modern situation.

Kafka's power of concreteness, his irony, and his shrewdness of humour and observation, have been remarked upon by other critics. But these qualities are not there to substantiate the symbolism, like the pips in raspberry jam. On the contrary, Kafka's symbolism constantly eludes the valuations we try to set upon it. It can hardly even be said to be an exploratory symbolism, for exploration implies the pre-existence of a way and a goal. Perhaps it would be truer to say that Kafka uses symbolism in solution, that is, something midway between the poles of resolution and dissolution. An instance of the elusive value of a character would be that of Barnabas in *The Castle*, who enters as a figure of almost Messianic promise, but soon collapses into something pitiable. An instance of the same technique within a passage of narrative is that of the description of the political rally in *Amerika* (to which we shall refer again later). At first the scene is held within its context, it is set in terms of the observers on the balcony, and we refer the events back to them. Then, as we follow

² Louis Adeane: *The Hero Myth in Kafka's Writing. Focus One*. Dobson, 1945. p. 50.

the movements of the crowd in the street below, the symbolism jumps out of its own frame, and our instinctive referential action is arbitrarily suspended. With Kafka, as with Melville, the symbolism is a means of digesting his experience; the more impossible the equation, and the more difficult we find it to reduce one of his novels to any schematic form, the more thorough has been the work of artistic assimilation. That is why, for instance, so much of *The Great Wall of China* is very inferior Kafka—the stories are expanded aphorisms rather than explorations of experience.

Sooner or later someone will write about Kafka as an 'existentialist'. For the literary critic, the importance of a novelist's philosophy lies not so much in what it is, but in how it modifies his attitude to his experience. Kafka's interest in Kierkegaard, for example, has been noted by Brod, and a comparison between the methods of the two writers is of importance in a study of Kafka's novels. In Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* the philosophical system, or rather lack of system, is rooted in the Kierkegaard-Regina relationship, and moves out into a wider field through interjected 'parables'. In Kafka's novels the central figure moves through a series of conflicts in character-groupings, each situation producing a modification of the next. The effect of such a progress is endless yet circuitous, like that of looking at the reflection of one mirror in another.

But Kierkegaard is a philosopher, and when, if ever, you have finished discussing his philosophy, you have finished with Kierkegaard. But Kafka is a novelist, and when, if ever, you have finished discussing his philosophy, you have only just begun. *Prima facie* Kafka's philosophy implies that he must possess an extremely scrupulous and rigorously controlled sensibility. The question at issue for Kafka as a novelist is, crudely, can he stand it? The extra-literary evidence to hand in Brod's *Life* and in the *Journal*³ shows, we think, the answer:

'Where should I find deliverance? So many false truths, lost in oblivion, have come back to the surface! If I have come through their real union so well as through their real separation, I have indeed done well. Without human reference there are no visible falsehoods within me. The limited circle is pure . . .' (*Journal*, p. 178).

'Everything is mere imagination: family, office, friends and streets—nothing but imagination; and, in the foreground or background, woman. But the most imminent truth is that you are pressing your

³ Kafka: *Journal Intime*, ed. P. Klossowski, Grasset, Paris, 1945. We are indebted to Mr John Frost for his kindness in translating all the passages quoted from the *Journal*. Since this essay was written Secker & Warburg have published *Kafka's Diaries*, vol. I.

head against the wall of a cell which has no window or door'. (ibid. p. 192).

Purity and limitation are achieved at the expense of a movement away from reality:

'To the best of my belief, I have shown none of the exigencies of life, save common human weakness. With the latter—an enormous force in this respect—I have greatly adopted the negativity of my time, which is, moreover, very close at hand; which I have no right to combat, only to represent, to a certain degree. I had no more share in the inheritance of meagre positivity than in that of extreme negativity, which reverts to positivity. Nor was I introduced into life by the already feeble hand of Christianity, like Kierkegaard, or hitched, like the Zionists, to the Jewish tallith, which is mere fancy. I am a beginning or an end.' (ibid. p. 221.)

His very scrupulousness in dealing with his own experience, and his Kierkegaardian 'teleological suspension of the ethical', drive him away from the common ground of normal human experience and, instead of being merely accidental, his neuroses are the formal part of his experience:

'However sad their forms, all these so-called disorders are realities of belief, anchorages of mankind in distress to some maternal soil. And where psycho-analysis searches for the primitive basis of religion, it can find nothing else but what is the basis of the individual's "disorders". It is true that there is a lack of religious community today; that there are numerous sects, limited for the most part to a few isolated people. But that may be only the aspect offered to an eye fixed on the present. These anchorages, which take root in a real soil, are not, however, a property peculiar to man, but, being prefigured in his nature, they subsequently transform it (as well as his body) in the same way. And do they expect to cure that?' (ibid. p. 287).

We have made these quotations at length because we think that they serve to illustrate the point in the most economical way. Kafka is not able to conduct the analysis of the actual at the level of intensity that he demands, unless he shifts away from the plane of reality. The attentive reading of a great novel should leave the reader with a modification of sensibility in relation to the broader fields of normal human conduct, in general terms, morals and/or politics. But the reader of *The Castle* or *The Trial* is hardly a reader at all in this sense: he is a spectator. He is aware, in Yeats's words, of 'an agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve'.

By comparing *Amerika* with *The Castle* and *The Trial*, we can see more clearly, in literary terms, the sort of evasion, and the shift away from the plane of reality, that have taken place in Kafka's development. As we have suggested above, *Amerika* contains the

registration of the impact of the modern situation upon the modern consciousness. Perhaps we could generalise Kafka's development and say that he tends later to abandon the task of *registration* in favour of the task of *analysis*. Analogies are dangerous, but the nearest parallel we can offer to a similar type of mind, with a pre-occupation similar to that of Kafka in *Amerika*, is T. S. Eliot in the poem *Difficulties of a Statesman*. At a lighter level it can be traced in the following letter of Kafka to Brod describing his work in an insurance office:

'In my four district headquarters—apart from all my other work—people fall, as if they were drunk, off scaffolds and into machines, all the planks tip up, there are landslides everywhere, all the ladders slip, everything one puts up falls down and what one puts down one falls over oneself. All these young girls in china factories who incessantly hurl themselves downstairs with mountains of crockery give one a headache. By Monday I hope to be over the worst. . . ' (Brod: *op. cit.* p. 70).

The hero in *Amerika*,⁴ without a friend in a strange country, ('the best of my knowledge won't be adequate for America', says Karl to Uncle Pollunder), moves between an acceptance of mercantile interests on the one hand, represented by his dependence on Uncle Jacob and the Hotel Manager, and retreat and escape from normal human activity on the other, represented by his friendship with Brunelda and Delamarche. ('We've lost all idea of what's happening in the world.'—*Amerika*, p. 249). Kafka's success in *Amerika* consists in his ability to register the terrifying pressure of the actual without involving himself in surrender or flight. The description of Uncle Jacob's warehouse, for instance, shows a similar quality of perceptiveness to that of the letter to Brod cited above:

'Through the hall there was a perpetual tumult of people, rushing hither and thither. Nobody said good-day, greetings were omitted, each man fell into step behind anyone who was going the same way, keeping his eyes on the floor, over which he was set on advancing as quickly as he could, or giving a hurried glance at a word or a figure here and there on the papers he held in his hand, which fluttered with the wind of his progress'.

And of the next passage, describing the political meeting as seen from Delamarche's balcony, it need only be said that *Amerika* was written in 1927:

The mob was flowing backwards and forwards without plan, each man propelled by his neighbour, not one braced on his own feet: the opposition party seemed to have gained a lot of new recruits.

⁴ *Amerika* by Franz Kafka. Trans. W. and E. Muir. Routledge. 1938.

. . . the candidate still kept on uttering words, but it was no longer clear whether he was outlining his programme or shouting for help: and unless Karl was mistaken a rival candidate had made his appearance, or rather several rivals, for here and there, when a light suddenly flared up, some figure could be seen, high on the shoulders of the crowd, orating with white face and clenched fists to the accompaniment of massed cheering'. (ibid. p. 255).

With such lines as 'each man fell into step behind anyone who was going the same way', 'each man propelled by his neighbour, not one braced on his own feet', 'it was no longer clear whether he was outlining his programme or shouting for help', Kafka manages to achieve an implicit moral valuation within the context of the narrative description.

Amerika is, we claim, Kafka's finest novel, because after *Amerika* Kafka abandons his necessarily fruitful, though to himself distasteful, contact with the world of normal human experience. He turns afterwards to literature for its own sake, or rather, for *his* own sake—literature becomes for him a means of solving a personal problem. The reference in his *Journal* to Flaubert 'dates' Kafka rather significantly:

'I have just read the following in one of Flaubert's published letters: "My novel is the rock to which I cling, and I know nothing of what goes on in the world".' (*Journal*, p. 168).

It is difficult to say much about Kafka that is both consecutive and truthful. But in conclusion we should suggest that the course of Kafka's development gives an indication of the relationship between a novelist and his personal philosophy, or lack of one. The philosophy, positive or negative, of a novelist does not matter, in the sense that it does not radically impair or make impossible his work. But it does impose very clear limitations upon it. We have, in an earlier article (BLACKFRIARS, Aug. 1944), endeavoured to suggest that the development of James Joyce after *Portrait of the Artist* involved a deliberate escape from the pressure of the actual. The development of Kafka after *Amerika* was not, however, in any sense an escape. It was rather an attempt to transcend the limitations imposed upon him, as a novelist, by his lack of a satisfactory personal philosophy. By attempting to make the novel a means of a solution of his religious problems, by attempting, indeed, to make the novel the very solution itself of these problems, Kafka was forced to shut himself off from that contact with the broader levels of human experience, which is the chief requisite of novel-writing as a creative social activity.

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