

FINITUDE AND FRUSTRATION:
CONSIDERATIONS ON BROD'S *KAFKA*

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A serious artist can on occasion be of at least clinical interest to the philosopher, so far as he manifests in an unusually immediate and urgent fashion reality as it is accessible in a particular milieu. This is the more true the better and more serious the artist is. It is eminently true in the case of Franz Kafka, whose writing has the fecund, symbolic character found in all great art.

Of Jewish extraction, Kafka, who lived against a Germano-Czech background and died in Prague in 1924 at the age of forty-one, left behind him a body of writing published posthumously for the most part and made up largely of enigmatic but unadorned and simple narratives. In their parable-like development, these narratives give evidence of an art that is more than "universal" in the sense in which this term is ordinarily understood. Kafka's art concerns itself in one way or another with being, with being at that level where statement becomes analogous and where to give voice to one truth is implicitly to express in some way an unlimited number of other truths as well. Kafka's art thus readily raises questions that lie at the very center of his existence, whence they tend to spread out in ever-widening circles to all reality.

The current ready acceptance of Kafka among highly active intellectual groups suggests that the way in which these questions are present to Kafka is extraordinarily symptomatic and that thoughtful men of today find them thoroughly representative of the questions that take shape at the centers of their own lives. Thus, even apart from his connection with such manifestly philosophic thought as that of Heidegger and Kierkegaard, Kafka is a figure of considerable interest to the philosopher who is attentive—as every philosopher must be—to the reality around him.

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The English translation of Max Brod's biography of Kafka¹ is a real acquisition from the philosophical point of view. Brod is able to draw on his close friendship with Kafka and on the great sympathy that genuine understanding demands, to do what a biographer of Kafka has to do: interpret Kafka's life in the most relevant and detailed terms at hand, those found in Kafka's works themselves. For, whereas it is quite true that a work of art has a certain autonomy—as something made it stands in a sense on its own, so that its author's personal history is only incidental to the work he creates—nevertheless, the life of an artist such as Kafka is so filled with his works that *they* can never be incidental to *it*.

Perhaps better than anyone else, Brod is aware of the great Kafkan sphinx: the spirit of frustration and kindly but uncompromising irony that thrusts itself from his life into his works. As Brod notes, frustration and irony are not for Kafka items of the sort that might figure in some horror story of Edgar Allan Poe's—specialized attitudes that can be made plausible for a particular purpose but that are felt nevertheless as something ornamental and adventitious to living. Kafkan frustration and irony are inexorable (Brod observes that Kafka's vision of disaster is disconcerting precisely because it is so unwilling on Kafka's part and because it is a vision forced on a man who is naturally lighthearted and playful): they are a component of existence as existence presents itself to us.

In Kafka there are no pits and pendulums. The Kafkan hero is involved not in stagy devices but in the intricacies of a perhaps strange but totally untheatrical situation. In *The Trial*, the hero is arrested—for what, he does not know. All his refining upon his understanding of his own situation brings not satisfaction but the very opposite: the issues only become more and more complicated because he is at a loss to know what he is trying to define. Attempts at understanding, instead of untangling matters, only horribly involve them by producing a greater accumulation of detail.

Similarly, in the more skillfully contrived narrative of *The Castle*, the hero spends his life attempting to get into contact with the officials of the Castle who oversee the village where he has come to work. But each interview supposedly scheduled with men apparently representing the Castle turns out to be an interview only with persons who can do no more than explain further and further the intricacies of protocol to be expected in one's dealing with Castle officials.

¹ Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphrey Roberts (New York, Schocken Books). The quotations used in this article appear by permission of Schocken Books, Inc.

Frustration and irony, always akin in being each a kind of contradiction, are inextricably interwoven here in the essential ambiguity that defines the Kafkan hero's position. Plainly some irony is involved in his situation. The situation clearly cannot mean what it seems to mean—in *The Trial* the arrest of the hero, Joseph K., does not mean that he is guilty of any crime in the ordinary sense—hence it must mean some sort of opposite. The frustration makes itself felt immediately: it consists largely in suspecting the irony of the situation and being completely unable to catch the something else, to discover what could be the opposite, that the situation implies.

Kafkan symbolism involves this frustration and irony in everything. There can be no doubt that in stories such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*, it is not only his own personal life, but also what he discovered, as Brod points out, in "his own unhappy people, homeless, haunted Jewry" that is making itself felt within Kafka. But, Brod discerningly notes, this very Jewry is again more than itself. It is a symbol of the entire human race. "What's your name, then?" one of Kafka's characters is asked. "Odradek," he replies; and, Brod notes,² "a whole range of Slav words' is set ringing, which all mean renegade, renegade from one's race, 'rod,' renegade from the council, 'rada,' the divine decision of the creation, 'rat.'" The last association is telling enough: being a renegade becomes the basic human situation, as indeed in a sense it is: by creation man is placed, as we say, outside his cause, to which he must return. "And your address?" the man is asked. "No fixed abode."

What Kafka sees he sees everywhere. Frustration is not only for himself as an individual torn between the desire to do nothing but write and the necessity of earning a living, nor only for himself as a Jew in the modern West. It is for Kafka as simply a human being. It is for all things. Brod himself suggests³ the Catholic interpretation that adds also a supernatural dimension: the frustration traces to the weakness of the Jew who does not accept Christ. But here again, one might observe, all men in one way or another (at least by occasional sin) to some extent reject Christ, so that the figure of the Jew once more is projected as a symbol. His position is the most dramatic of all human positions here, for Christ was the greatest and most dynamic force and figure not only in all human history but especially in Jewish history—if the center of humanity, much more the center of Judaism. Judaism without its Christ is indeed humanity without its God.

It is not strange that Kafka, involved in these analogies, should have sensed frustration all around him as he worked at his job in the semi-

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

governmental Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. Kafka could not blind himself, as many can, to the point of seeing here an impregnable stronghold against trouble. The suave and genteel composure at the surface of the insurance world was vulgar and not convincing. Poring over reports of accident cases, he sensed this world as the great depository of disaster in our day—the well (it is reassuringly plush-lined and made out to be so deep that no one ever need fear having to inspect the bottom) down which all that is uneven and askew and disconcerting in life can be tumbled into oblivion while a surface of complete order is preserved in terms of cash balances. Here, where the feeling is commonly fostered that tragedy is sublimated in monetary compensation, Kafka saw the same thing he saw elsewhere: frustration, discouraged not a whit by cash settlement. He writes to Brod both in fun and in all seriousness:

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.⁴

Others might be distracted by insurance payments and the *ersatz* sense of adjustment they engendered. Kafka remained acutely conscious of the frustration that alone made them necessary and to which they bore elaborate and permanent testimony.

The interests asserting themselves in his works thus make it inevitable that one formulate the probably central question of Kafka's entire life somewhat in this fashion: How far can the assertion of frustration be allowed to go? How far before one has denied all finality to life, denied the existence of God, and inflicted a mortal wound on one's own soul?

In admitting the fact of frustration, the Catholic will go a long way—a good deal further than most Catholics today will perhaps find themselves spontaneously admitting: in the last analysis, *everything* short of God himself involves man in frustration. Strangely enough, frustration is the nearly universal term of human activity. Frustration seems to be not an exception but the law. There is only one Being that man can concern himself with without finding himself involved in frustration; and, moreover, this Being that forms the sole exception to the law is, in a way, the most difficult of all beings to arrive at—to arrive at him requires the journey of a lifetime, no less.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

All the beings readily accessible to man involve man in a dissatisfaction that, as he comes gradually to appreciate, is radically far more than the cloying of interest that sets in with time. Such cloying is only a superficial, if rhetorically telling, manifestation of something much worse—of a dissatisfaction that is quite automatic and inseparable from the very act of concerning oneself with any or all beings save only the One. The trouble is, as the Catholic will admit, that only the Transcendent offers possibilities.

All other things—other persons, the most perfect of scientific systems, all the knowledge possible to human beings (for these things are all created being)—these mean for man nothing but frustration, frustration delayed perhaps but inevitable. Even for man to turn and examine his own knowledge of God and say that it will satisfy him (this knowledge, too, is a created thing and is not God) will involve him in disaster. But the Catholic—who sometimes forgets this last point—will not admit that somewhere the frustration is not ended. Man is made for God: if he will bring himself to face more and more toward God (this requires effort and much random movement, experience, experimentation), at long last in God his activity will terminate.

What Kafka's ultimate attitude was here it would be difficult—perhaps would have been difficult even for Kafka—to say. And to attempt to decide the matter in any definitive sense is undoubtedly intrusion upon the domain of God, whose prerogative alone it is to judge man's soul. Still, in a biography the question cannot be entirely ignored. Brod asserts that Kafka's reaction to things "never precluded the possibility of final consolation,"⁵ and the verdict is not easy to dispute. Much of Kafka is plainly and explicitly religious; and statements such as "we are nihilistic thoughts that came into God's head"⁶ admit an entirely valid interpretation: in all finite being there is an admixture of nonbeing.

Although his denial is somewhat enigmatic and requires explanation, Kafka does explicitly deny the kind of Manichaeism that would regard the world as a sin of God's or as a creation of the Demiurge: "I believe we are not such a radical relapse of God's, only one of his bad moods. He has had a bad day." As it stands, this statement might, it is true, in the very act of foreswearing Manichaeism merit the censure *male sonat*; still it is not at all beyond redemption, for in creating man God has permitted evil. God does not cause evil and he has a real divine magic that can draw good out of it, so that he can have reason to let evil come about; nevertheless, the fact remains, had

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

God not created, evil would not have been. Here is the "bad day," which is not, however, *radically* bad: this can be the same distinction as St. Thomas's (*Summa Theologica*, I, 49. 2) that God causes physical evil (not moral evil, however), only not per se but *quasi per accidens*. These two statements of Kafka's seem to be the only ones recorded by Brod that require some painstaking orientation.

Kafka's attitude toward God is of course a crucial point in his manipulation of the frustration theorem. It is of some moment to note that whatever his personal interior attitudes towards his Creator may have been, Kafka's writing and conversation as recorded by Brod are wanting in the intensely personalistic *I-Thou* relationship between God and the individual man that is entirely distinctive of both Old Testament and New Testament revelation ("I am the Lord *thy* God"; "Thou shalt not have strange gods before *me*"; "I have spoken to *you* from heaven"; and so on). It is as though Kafka were working with the fiction of the *Aufklärung*—and indeed, although Brod does not discuss the matter, it seems that he may have been influenced pro or con by the Jewish Hasidism of the *Aufklärung* period—when men imagined an explanation of reality conducted and completed with perfect satisfaction in terms of creaturely concepts.

The mirage of a closed philosophical "system" that M. Gilson and others have so rightly condemned is a relic of this kind of imagining; and subconscious acceptance of the mirage can generate immediate hostility to Kafka, who finds the mirage yielding such negative results. As proposed by some Catholics, the ideal of a closed philosophical system indeed attempts to reify the mirage envisioned by a cruder rationalism. It attempts to work God quite explicitly into the system, but this emended "system" remains a mirage nevertheless because its knowledge of God can never be more than a function of its knowledge of the world—what philosophy knows about God is what the world manifests about him and no more. Metaphysics, or for that matter theology, can be only a *relatively* satisfactory approach to being. Neither can be a "system" in the sense of a body of truths that is so self-contained and completely satisfying that if one could master the whole "system" he would simply have nothing further to ask—a system that does not raise questions it is powerless to answer itself. To project such a system is equivalently to deny God as the final end of man. Only God is such a being as this system would propose to be, a being whose explanation does not lie in some manner outside itself.

Kafka's assertion of frustration—and of a frustration in some sense ultimate—can be sustained so far as it asserts that when man approaches creation from creation's point of view, if he will only look

sharply enough and honestly enough, he will have to say that it makes no sense. There is nothing scandalous in this fact. Even our "ultimate principles" or our "eternal truths" will not put all reality into solution; they are after all ultimate only relatively and eternal *secundum quid*. There is one ultimate and one eternal Being, and this Being is not an abstract principle (which is a *judgment*, a poor, two-membered, bisected hold on truth that an angelic intellect, for one, finds quite unserviceable as it gazes inexpressibly deeper into reality than we do). This Being is God. God is the ultimate and full explanation, the intelligibility, of everything; but what we know about God from reason, and even from revelation, is not sufficient to make this explanation fully available to us as yet.

Thus there can be no doubt that Kafka, in asserting the fact of quite pervasive frustration for man, is turning in an essentially accurate report of what the world presents from the point of view he adopts, which is the point of view of a man devising an explanation in terms of created being, or of knowledge, even knowledge of God, derived from created being—the point of view of a man attempting an explanation, that is, in terms gathered solely from this life.

Here is where, in Kafka's life and in all men's lives, the matter of personality and a personal God becomes all-important. For man's only hope of escaping from this insufficiency turns on his being a person. Man's intellectual gaze falls more directly on certain created beings than it does on God. But the personality that he enjoys involves in its very intellectuality the power of reflex activity. Man can return upon himself and, seeing the unsatisfactory condition of his own being when it is in possession of created being, even were this *all* of created being, can see the necessity of concerning himself with God, even though God be very imperfectly and indirectly grasped by the intellect.

Yet if God were not himself personal, if God did not have the perfection of this reflexive activity within himself, the very manner in which man must escape from his own insufficiency would be without relation to God, without cause, an illusion. Thus all would be lost. The human intellect would have to save itself through reflection, and yet this act of reflection would have nothing whatsoever to do with God. To say there is no question of *me* and *thee* between man and God or of *me* and *thee* between God and man is implicitly to make frustration the goal of all man's actions.

Concerning Kafka's final attitude toward the matter of a personal God, we have no full answer because we do not know the outcome of the workings of grace in his soul. The remark quoted by Brod⁷ is

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

ambiguous: "One of the forms in which this concealment [of a man's faith in something indestructible in himself] may be expressed is the belief in a personal God." Here Kafka does not precisely condemn or belittle such belief but only says that it may sometimes supply for something else. Moreover, Brod indicates⁸ that the theorems of freedom and hope are infrequent but unmistakable in Kafka and are indeed the *most characteristic* feature of his thought; Brod likewise discerningly observes that, since in all his preoccupation with frustration Kafka does not comfort *himself* but allows the burden of blame, whatever this may turn out to be, to rest on his own shoulders, he sees ultimately "no heteronymy between God and man but only indistinctness, an admittedly almost desperate complication."⁹

Seen in terms of the issues raised in his writings, Kafka's life is felt as permeated with the question of his direct relationship with a personal God for the very reason that, in operating with the theorem of ostensibly invincible frustration, Kafka comes as close as it seems humanly possible to come to this question without actually broaching it. His failure to broach the question explicitly in his works is not tantamount to a denial of a personal God but, rather, is undoubtedly a legitimate artistic procedure. It is only he who is not really convinced of the caducity of created being who will resent giving it *carte blanche* for an all-out attempt at justifying itself.

There is, moreover, a special reason why Kafka, like all people seriously devoted to fine arts, should be preoccupied with futility and frustration, for there is a sense in which all human expression, which is a merely human art, always fails in handling a truth. "Naturally," Kafka observes at the close of his "Letter to My Father" (which, persuaded by his mother, Kafka never delivered),

in reality things cannot fit together so neatly as the examples in my letter, life is more than a game of patience; but were the proofs to be corrected on the lines suggested in my objection, a proof-reading which I am unable and unwilling myself to carry out in detail, something so near the truth would be arrived at that it might comfort us both a little, and make our lives and our deaths easier.¹⁰

Human expression is always doomed to a measure of failure and hence of frustration, not because it never hits the truth *exactly* or because it always hits just to the side of the truth (this would be modernism and skepticism), but rather because it always hints obliquely

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72, 185.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

at more than it says directly. It is always in over its head. It always suggests, points to, things it does not say. Despite what Descartes and his followers have supposed, there is no human statement that is completely clear-cut at all its edges, for nothing can be said by man that does not in some way call for and depend upon further explanation. We can grasp no truth in *all* its implications, completely. There is no such thing as *total* statement within the reach of merely human powers.

Now a fine art that is fully serious supposes that its audience is as completely as possible wide awake, using all its faculties to the utmost. But nothing can really satisfy such application that is of its very nature incomplete and limited, that implies something outside itself, that implies in the very act of being what it is something other that it isn't. Hence a writer engaged with such an audience must take it for granted that the audience in the very act of apprehending the adequacy of the writer's expression will simultaneously sense its inadequacy and the fact that this inadequacy can never be entirely circumvented. The writer therefore will have to take into account this awareness. He will have to include in his work of art an acknowledgment of the very deficiencies involved in its being. This is the vanity inseparable from even the most serious art: it urges the all-out use of one's faculties while being forced to admit that this all-out use will not in the last analysis here be warranted. The serious artist must "plug" the product of his art and simultaneously make the very process of "plugging" it a "debunking" process. He must make his works ironic. Kafka's "something so near the truth that . . ." derives from, and acknowledges, the necessity of irony in mature artistic expression.

Kafka's very art itself thus brings him back on another plane to the frustration connected with the insufficiency of all created being. Since to be face to face with this insufficiency is the next thing to turning to God, Kafka is speaking with deep insight when he calls his writing "a form of prayer."¹¹

It is, moreover, an indication of Brod's similarly fine insight permeating his entire treatment of Kafka's life that he should observe¹² that holiness "is the only right category under which Kafka's life and work can be viewed." The aptness of this category in summing up the most visible and assertive issue in Kafka's life cannot be disputed. In *The Trial* and *The Castle* the frustration is really that of the man who, willy-nilly, cannot bring himself to draft an answer to a question until he has laid out *all* the difficulties so that he can cover them *explicitly* in his answer. This is a bogus perfectionism so far as it makes the ability

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

to answer difficulties the chief measure, instead of a by-product, of truth. Difficulties distract us from the truth, for no difficulty concerns a truth *directly*; and the number of difficulties available concerning any truth is always potentially infinite. The thing to do is to find out whether a thing is so by the evidence *for* it and then, if it seems good, to proceed to the difficulties.

However, although to hunt complete satisfaction in terms of answers to difficulties is really to allow one's quest for happiness to be dominated by finite being, and although one cannot be sure how far Kafka escaped yielding to the temptation that the prospects of such a hunt could offer his painstaking, civilized mind, nevertheless, one must acknowledge that to concern oneself, as Kafka did, with the problem of complete satisfaction at all—to be a perfectionist—is in the last analysis to concern oneself in one way or another with God.