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# *Kafka's Afflicted Vision: A Literary-Theological Critique*

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## I

Literary critics often point out that Franz Kafka's posthumous, unfinished novel *The Castle* (*Das Schloss*, 1926) tells the story of the novel's main character, simply called K., in pursuit of salvation. The novel's aesthetic and interpretive complexity, it will be seen, underlines the multi-layered meaning of salvation itself, in a modern world in which salvation is not necessarily one of divine grace, of deliverance from sin and damnation, in short, of redemption in the hands of an all-powerful God.

A non-Christian and a German-speaking Jew born in Prague in 1883, Kafka, though intuitively aware of salvation in its metaphysical tensions, relegates those tensions to their modern settings and circumstances, with their inherently existential anxieties, concerns, antinomies. Hence, in *The Castle*, K. is hardly a protagonist seeking entrance into God's divine kingdom since his aspirations are not essentially soteriological in nature, but are at once more modest and yet consuming in character, and appropriate to the stark, cruel realities of a modern world with its imperium of illusions and deceptions.

K.'s quest is mundane, insofar as his moral standards are com-

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parably mundane. His is not a “pilgrim’s progress” or a titanic spiritual wrestle to save one’s soul from a world in which the legion of “devils” is ever on the march, ensnaring human beings by whatever means available. Kafka himself is not at peace with either the God of the Fathers or the Prophetic Faith; indeed his work enfeebles the idea of the holy and the contemplation of the divine. His remarkably constructed and lucid artistic vision remains fixed in and vexed by a world transvalued and transformed by the catastrophic violations of the community and the soul that, in our time, emerged with especial ferocity when the Great War of 1914-1918 ordained the “journey’s end” of European man, for whom no future, no possibility of grace, no incarnation of a holy event could exist any longer.

K. seeks official permission to enter the Castle and its environs to engage in his work as a Land-Surveyor. He claims that Count Westwest, the supreme lord of the Castle, is expecting him, along with his assistants. Here K., a man in his thirties, intends to take up his duties, even as a kind of village worker, or simply as someone who has a binding connection with the Castle—as one who, supposedly, has a claim, or a right, or a sanction. From the very beginning of the story, K.’s quest is one steadily besieged by delay and disappointment.

The introductory paragraph of the novel underscores the tenuous nature of K.’s goal once he arrives one late evening for the purpose of assuming his duties as the Count’s Land-Surveyor. What he sees before and around him is a village deep in snow, the Castle hill “hidden, veiled in mist and darkness”—a mysterious, eerie scene with no “glimmer of light to show that a castle was there.” This immediate scene is a forbidding mixture of strangeness and awe, one blurring reality and unreality: “On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village, K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him.”

Not only is K. seeking entrance into a particular kingdom, or community, but also an audience with a particular persona, or potentate, at once distant and invisible, both present and not present, who seems to be as inaccessible and shadowy as the Castle territory itself. And throughout K. has to confront and challenge the “authorities” who have the final right to bar or to unbar his way. In any direct or indirect contact with these authorities, K. comes to find, “one needed in everything else the greatest caution and

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had to look around on every side before one made a single step." In short, we see that K., no matter how beleaguered or befuddled, is striving "to find a place for himself in the scheme of things."<sup>1</sup>

The circumstances surrounding K.'s claim to a position in the Castle are intrinsically ambiguous. One critic, in fact, contends that K. has no legitimate right to expect to have his position, since he never in the first place was appointed to it. Thus, what K. is claiming is part of a "colossal fraud," a "deception," a perpetrated affair. His two churlish "Assistants," Arthur and Jeremiah, whom K. first encounters in the village and thinks of as "snakes," were "assigned" to him by the Castle; they are not necessarily his old assistants who have worked with K. in the past, though they are perhaps part of the subterfuge that K. himself has concocted in his bid to become an official of the Castle.

Kafka's depiction of the "victory of fiction over reality" must be seen as an integral element in the novel's plot. Simply put, K. is to be viewed as a "stranger," with a strange past, who now appears on the scene. His motives are obscure, perhaps even illegitimate, suspicious, or at most baseless, insofar as the original order regarding his appointment does not exist. K.'s "endless journey" is the result of a "misunderstanding," or some "trifling miscalculation," a "possible error" in the bureaucratic process on the part of the "Central authorities." Still another critic sees K. as "the combination of Faust and Ulysses in the heart of our century."<sup>2</sup>

*"Victory of  
fiction over  
reality"  
integral to  
plot.*

There is then one "remaining conclusion" regarding K.'s plan as a summoned land-surveyor, in the face of official rejections of his demands for recognition and a place in the Castle. The document supporting K.'s belief in his right to his position is genuine and yet not genuine, since the authorities, as the Mayor of the Village explains, view the letter to K. with reference to his claim as being "in no sense an official communication, but only a private letter." He also explains to K. that the letter in question "means nothing more than that Klamm [a high functionary] intends to take a personal interest in you if you should be taken into the state service."

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<sup>1</sup> Eliseo Vivas, "Kafka's Distorted Mask," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Ronald Gray (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), 139. This essay is reprinted from Vivas's *Creation and Discovery* (1948).

<sup>2</sup> Pietro Citati, *Kafka*, translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1990), 253.

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K.'s appeal to the Mayor has a curious significance since it lacks the kind of definitive validity that officialdom generally expects it to have. Yes and No, Yes . . . but, hence characterize what is perceived as K.'s "illusory" expectations. Even K.'s telephone inquiry to the Castle, he learns, is not authentic in its claim; is nothing more than sheer "hymning and singing," because "There's no fixed connection with the Castle, no central exchange that transmits our calls farther." As K. himself declares, "the only remaining conclusion . . . is that everything is very uncertain and insoluble, including my being thrown out."

Clearly, K.'s declaration of his rights is part of the deception (or fate) he has spawned, and a deception with which the Castle itself is playing its own game, by indulging K.'s arguments. What we find throughout the novel, especially in K.'s encounters with the Castle's authorities, is mutual deceit being played to the hilt, though, too, there is this one administrative certainty: ". . . the Castle always has the advantage."

*Kafka troubled by "incommensurability" of divine law and human law.*

Ostensibly, Kafka's novel, as such discerning commentators as Edwin Muir and Thomas Mann have suggested, deals with the undulant life of the cosmos, the ceaseless search for God, and "the possibilities of salvation."<sup>3</sup> It could be said, too, that Kafka's vision as a whole conveys a fearful religious problem and, in turn, challenges both his readers and his exegetes to reflect on his meaning, or meanings. No less than Fyodor Dostoevsky, whom he considered "one of my true blood-relations," Kafka was troubled by the "everlastingly accursed questions," in their depth and magnitude: their moral perplexity, antinomies, enigmas, paradoxes; but, above all, by the "incommensurability" of divine law and human law, which constitutes an important facet of *The Castle*.

K. is seeking salvation in any variant form that he can find and that will somehow earn him a sense of inclusion, belonging, accomplishment. His search, according to some well-meaning interpreters, adumbrates an excruciating effort to "work out [one's] own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil. 2:12) K. testifies to

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<sup>3</sup> See Edwin Muir, "Franz Kafka," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 33-44; and Thomas Mann, "Homage," in Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, translated from the German by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1974), ix-xvii. The definitive English edition, translated by the Muirs, and based on the definitive German editions (1935, 1951), was issued in 1954. All passages quoted in the text are from this edition. Muir's essay is reprinted from his *Life and Letters* (1934).

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Kafka's often-quoted assertion that "Man cannot live without an enduring faith in something indestructible within him." His actual fate, however, as it pitilessly unfolds in *The Castle*, is a repudiation of this affirmation and attests to "the futility of resistance" and to the invincible power of the absurdity of living. K. himself is representative of "the condemned man" who is powerless before the ineradicable condition of despair, non-meaning, exclusion, isolation. For him there is no road to human dignity, no release from a sentence of death, even as "enduring faith" is a platitude in a world that dictates extinction in a "small stone quarry, deserted and desolate," as suffered by Kafka's protagonist, the bank clerk Joseph K., in *The Trial*.

*K.'s fate attests to the invincible power of the absurdity of living.*

The fleeting thought of escaping from a "desolate country" is one that K. refuses to entertain, even when Frieda, his mistress, "a plain, oldish, skinny girl with short, thin hair," begs him at one point to escape to France or Spain, where the two of them would find some peace, some lesser tension and pressures of existence. What we come to see in K. is the depiction of what, as Kafka wrote to his friend Max Brod regarding the nature of his creative work, constitutes "a descent to the dark powers, an unchaining of spirits whose natural state is to be bound servants." Indeed, K.'s life-story discloses his inability either to accept the condition of a "bound servant" or to undergo the inner travails of "the dark night of the soul" that lead to a purified and sanctified state of release beyond guilt and punishment—and beyond moral paralysis.

In essence, K.'s quest for salvation can be described as being dubious and abstract, to the extent that for him salvation entails fictitious contexts and untenable aims and polar directions; that, finally, it is synchronous with self-interest and self-preservation insofar as he must achieve inherently subjective purposes, intimately related to the prospects of his own survival (and success) in a world in which the currency of salvation changes value almost instantly. Again and again, as we view K.'s conduct we see it in its necessarily alternative modes, in quality, in desire, in utility. In the course of his quest, K. is consciously or unconsciously manipulative and calculating; one gets the distinct impression that he yearns for a safety net that will save him from the unknown, the untested, the unpredictable. Hence, he will devise any expedient that will bring to him those advantages that make his way

*K.'s quest entails fictitious contents and untenable aims.*

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more tolerable in a world in which the dictates of fate and fortune are the only constant.

*K. a selfish  
seeker who  
will do  
whatever  
earns him  
greater  
advantage.*

K.'s pursuit of salvation is subject to expediency, compromise, treachery, caprice, whim; to those encompassing conditions and circumstances that defy absolute criteria of truth and fulfillment. There is much truth in the accusations leveled by Frieda when she charges that K. is a selfish seeker after his own special endeavors; as one who promotes his "hidden intention" and will opportunely adapt himself to any situation that earns him greater advantage. In short, he is an operative who will, if he must and can, push aside, discard, or exploit people, events, and situations that hinder his "goals": "You take every possibility into account; providing that you reach your end, you're ready to do anything; should Klamm want me, you're prepared to give me to him; should he want you to stick to me, you'll stick to me; should he want you to fling me out, you'll fling me out. . . ." A damning indictment, her words remind us that the quest for salvation should be made of sterner stuff, and should hold one to a higher standard than that determined "on your terms."

*Nebulous  
form of  
salvation  
impelled by  
disordered  
and deformed  
secular temper.*

To connect Kafka's work and thought, and *The Castle* in particular, with what Camus calls a "theology of action" can be misleading or even confusing. To a true religious believer, K. is the embodiment of a vague and deracinated theology, his quest lacking an interior moral yearning or salvific impulse for divine peace. Religious believers, obviously, are foiled by a K. who embraces no creed of faith, no moral and spiritual absolutes, no clear-cut grasp of redemption in its supernatural essences. As such his quest for salvation is nebulous in form; is impelled and stamped by a disordered and deformed secular temper. K., thus, seeks to exploit his plight in its subjective facets rather than to focus on a path to grace. For some of his readers and interpreters, in fact, K. must finally exemplify the drift of an atheism or of a skepticism that disregards authentic forms of salvation, and that in the end assumes the volatile character of pseudo-stratagems of salvation.

Hence, to speak of a theology of action in *The Castle* (or, for that matter, of Kafka himself as "the last holy writer," according to John Updike) distorts religious meaning insofar as salvation has no providential or covenantal precepts, and is in the main attuned to man's temporal *and* personal destiny, one that is sealed by a faithlessness that rejects a grammar of assent. The quest for salva-

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tion in *The Castle* has no definitive religious character or telos; if, on the surface, it does have certain intangible, metaphysical ends, these have no sacrosanct tenets. To theologize K.'s pursuit of salvation is to water down the principles of true spirituality with the pain of deracination as the origin of his journey in spiritual identity. As such, K.'s quest has no sacred objective and is largely centripetal in intentions. K., in short, represents modern man trapped in a secular prison-house, obsessed and victimized by modern demons in sundry spatial and temporal guises and shapes.

*K.'s quest largely centripetal in intentions.*

K. is the embodiment of the modern community and soul in shifting and drifting configurations, spawned by and adaptive to a chronolatrous world. In fine, *The Castle* is singularly lacking in religious connection and in moral vision—resignedly subservient to the modern temper of doubt, incertitude, vacillation. “Kosmos Kafka,” as it is personified in K., is a vacuous representation of human ignominy and underlines a troubled and troubling metaphysical inconclusiveness, oblivious of the Faith of the Fathers, and of that which defines and distinguishes the realms of heaven and earth, the eternal and the temporal, the Kingdom of Spirit and the Kingdom of Enmity.

It can be surmised that K. perhaps would be happy to find salvation in both these realms simultaneously since he lacks the discriminating spiritual insight and strength that help one to distinguish the higher from the lower realms of being. K. lacks the sustaining courage of effort that would enable him to make hard choices that lead to grace. He is, as the novel demonstrates, incapable of, or prohibited from, a leap of faith, or of claspings the moral virtue that would help to mitigate captivity in a “demonic nothingness.”<sup>4</sup>

*K. lacks courage of effort necessary to make hard choices that lead to grace.*

The sharply defined position of the religious believer vis-à-vis Kafka, and K., needs to be first recognized, if only to perceive the enormous gap between religious affirmation and supramundane defiance, or indifference, as we have seen it develop in the modern age. Kafka's art evinces a modern gnosticism. Yet, it is also fair to insist on more strictly defining and interpreting Kafka (and his spokesman K.) even in his so-called quasi-religious dimensions. In

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Henry, “The Meaning of ‘Demonic Nothingness,’” *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review* (Summer 2003), 208-217. “Demonic Nothingness” is from Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (1952).

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his narratives we discover a profound relevance, especially in a new millennium, as we strive to explore and comprehend more fully basic metaphysical dissonances that mirror modernism and now postmodernism in a de-divinized, de-sacramentalized world.

Kafka helps us to view and to estimate the “metamorphosis” that manifests the “universal relativity” that the American teacher and critic Irving Babbitt saw in its imperial phenomena in modern life, literature, and thought, especially as these have progressively unhinged First Principles and the Permanent Things. Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926), and *Amerika* (1927) (“novels of the spiritual picaresque,” in Austin Warren’s phrase)<sup>5</sup> serve as astonishing portrayals of the plight of modern civilization. An unrelenting empirio-criticism of human meaning, of human destiny and salvation, can be detected at the heart of K.’s quest in *The Castle*. Kafka’s protagonist’s zealous quest demands scrupulous reevaluation if the modern temper and its consequences are to be fathomed, and if religious truths in their pattern of steady devotion are not to disintegrate totally in a new millennium.

Above all, K.’s pursuit of salvation helps to remind us of precisely those redeeming values Babbitt is striving to recover in the modern world—“vital unity, vital measure, vital purpose.”<sup>6</sup> Any recovery of this triad needs to begin with a fearless participation in K.’s quest, if only to understand its intrinsic problems and results. *The Castle* shows that we simply cannot afford to hide in our sacred edifices as long as they are under constant attack. Anarchy itself will inevitably prevail if K.’s fate is to be ignored or denied or assuaged—and if salvation itself is to be more than a relativistic, multifarious activity. To know K. is to know that transcendence as a divine expression—and affirmation—is not possible. The disposition and the tone of *The Castle*, as registered in K.’s total movements, evince disequilibrium and spiritual inertia embodied in the emptying forms of nihilism and false gods.

Here, too, it should be noticed that in K.’s quest there are no contemplative signs of appeal to the divine or of ascending a lad-

*K.’s pursuit a reminder of values Babbitt seeks to recover for modern world: “vital unity, vital measure, vital purpose.”*

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<sup>5</sup> See Austin Warren, “Franz Kafka,” in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 123-132. This essay first appeared under the title “Kosmos Kafka,” found in Warren’s *Rage for Order* (1948).

<sup>6</sup> See George A. Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt: An Appreciation* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1999), Chapter Two, “The Critical Mission,” 42-82, and Chapter Six, “The Widening of the Circle,” 149-169.

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der to paradise. Erich Heller, in his adroit discussion, observes that the Castle of Kafka's novel is "a heavily fortified garrison of a company of Gnostic demons. . . . In their icy detachment they inspire certainly no awe, but fear and revulsion."<sup>7</sup> It is precisely these "Gnostic demons" that encircle K.'s search for salvation and that are his incessant affliction, his spiritual self-defeat in its recurring death-images, or as Kafka notes in one of his aphoristic reflections: "Like a road in autumn: Hardly is it swept clean before it is covered with dead leaves."

## II

At first glance, K.'s struggle against absurdity, despair, hopelessness—against a world that turns a deaf ear to his pleas for assistance and direction—can arouse sympathy. Yet, as one carefully examines K.'s stratagems for salvation, one becomes aware of his tawdry motives, as these affect his basic aim: "to get my business with the authorities properly settled." His goal in the end has a slippery quality that is as troubling to the reader as it is to Frieda: "But the truth remains that you keep many things from me; you come and go, I don't know where or from where." K. is in some ways an accomplished casuist: he has excuses for everything and he covers his tracks cunningly so as to protect himself in making his "way to Klamm." His cunning is rooted in his obsessive self-interest.

*Sympathy  
for K.  
unwarranted.*

The way of ascent does not dominate K.; a transcendent act is not central in his quest, which actually and finally terminates in stasis. Kafka's world is ultimately one that comes to a full stop, and K. himself is one who dwells in its fixity, which has become the hallmark of the modern age in which closed rooms, closed doors, and closed windows personify a barren, spiritless world. Within this world K. creates makeshift stratagems that have no basic orientation.

*Makeshift  
stratagems  
cannot bring  
order to  
barren,  
spiritless  
world.*

It will be found, too, that K. enunciates no definitive criticism of his surroundings, except in the hackneyed form of his disappointments and protestations. His position is largely abject and passive as he seeks to gain access to the Castle and confront its

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<sup>7</sup> Erich Heller, "The World of Franz Kafka," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 33, 36.

faceless authorities. Nor do his experiences exact from the reader sympathy, or even empathy. Somehow K.'s dilemma is conveyed with the same perfunctoriness, the same abjectness, that characterizes his estrangement. He is the appropriate embodiment of modern man as a "sleepwalker" in a disinherited world in which, as Martin Buber writes, "A broad meaninglessness governs without restraint. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Malaise, "sickness unto death," is the regnant condition in K., in the novel's people, and in the sequential narrative of *The Castle's* events or, to be more exact, non-events. "There is a goal," writes Kafka, "but no way: what we call the way is only wavering." He is an etcher of the modern wasteland that nullifies any possibility of "redeeming the time." *The Castle* is a prophetic evocation of the realm in which the heart is frozen and the soul is dead, and in which spiritual nullity reigns as the Great Ethnarch.

The element of speciousness that revolves around the idea of salvation, and that impinges on K.'s stratagems, is confluent with the speciousness of the Castle's officialdom. Klamm and his nondescript colleagues have no distinguishing appearance, which changes incessantly, as if to expunge an integral identity or scene or memory. Flux is the common condition, whether of a nameless and faceless authority or of its seat of governance. The offices have barriers even at the entrance to the rooms and they are just the same as the ones never yet passed, or that have already been seen. Even after a young Barnabas, "an officially recognized messenger," has spoken with officials, he poses the question: "But who are those officials, and what are the messages?"

Though he is directly assigned to Klamm, Barnabas doubts "that the official who is referred to as Klamm is really Klamm." Indeed, to Olga, his sister, he "refuses to admit his doubts are doubts." The image of Klamm, we learn, has been truly "constructed . . . but only in fundamentals," and always in passing: "For he's reported as having one appearance when he comes into the village and another on leaving it, after having his beer he looks different from what he does before it, when he's alone he's different from when he's talking to people, and . . . he's almost another person up in the Castle."

K., understandably affected by this "depressing information,"

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<sup>8</sup> See Martin Buber, "Kafka and Judaism," in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 157-162. This essay is reprinted from Buber's *Two Types of Faith* (1951).

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“regarded it as a great consolation to find other people who were at least externally much in the same situation as himself.” Klamm is, then, for Barnabas, and for K., unreal, intangible—a chimaera; someone who fleetingly infuses an illusion, or a dream, or a fancy. “Klamm’s eyes,” we are told, “are almost shut, [and] he generally seems to be sleeping and only polishing his glasses in a kind of dream.” In essence, K. and Kafka’s reader are “gazing into the illusory emptiness” in which any quest for salvation is itself illusion, or phantasmagoria. Appearance and reality in *The Castle* are irreconcilable, the one denying the other, and with neither one affording the likelihood of anything more than “this miserable uncertainty.”

In *The Castle* the human situation is one in which any search for salvation meets with failure and despair; the search itself is circuitous, as one finds oneself stranded in “eternally empty streets,” ending with the defeat of all struggle and the death of effort. Arrivals and departures are, in the novel, the same, as are endings and beginnings. An inherent tyranny, in fact, is found in the circuitousness of the structure of *The Castle*, as is demonstrated by Klamm’s treatment of women: “‘Klamm’s a kind of tyrant over women,’” Olga declares to K., “‘he orders first one and then another to come to him, puts up with none of them for long, and orders them to go just as he ordered them to come.’” Love and lovelessness are one and the same.

*In Kafka’s castle, love and lovelessness are one and the same.*

The circumstances and conditions of K.’s world point to a future which has no future, or to the impossibility of “colliding with the future,”<sup>9</sup> in Ortega y Gasset’s phrase. This is the historical future of death that, in our time, confronted the soldiers “under fire” in the winding trenches of the Western front; it is also a future legislated by modern ideology in the forms of Communism and Nazism, as well as by the Statism that has aggressively developed in the twentieth century, as portrayed in such novels as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*. In this respect, K. is emblematic of modern man “in sight of chaos,” an alienated and obsessed figure who (like his creator) grasps for solutions that are painted in the twilight colors of an existential dread and lack of direction, a never-ending lostness.

*A search for solutions in a never-ending lostness.*

Kafka did not live to finish *The Castle*, which was brought out

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<sup>9</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, translated by Mildred Adams (New York, 1969), 45.

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For Kafka,  
men and  
women are  
"sleep-walkers,  
not evildoers."

by Max Brod, who as literary executor rightly chose not to honor Kafka's wishes that the manuscript be destroyed. Thus the novel, no less than K.'s quest, is itself not complete, which is in keeping with the incomplete life of the modern soul in search of itself, spiritually vulnerable and in danger of being as totally extinguished as are any of the glimmers of hope in the novel's apocalyptic circle of fire. K.'s life has no *arché* and no *telos*; it has an unassuaging grimness without the benefit of prophetic hope proffered by the ancient Hebrew prophets. *The Castle* offers us, above all, a centerless world, in which its inmates are like shadows in the land of death. One critic, Zadie Smith, in an admirable commentary titled in Kafka's own words found in his diary entry dated March 30, 1913, "The Limited Circle Is Pure," observes: ". . . Kafka has no center. Kafka avoided every *telos*, all termini, purposes, meaningful endings, and resting spots. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Structurally, *The Castle* reveals unending stagnation in a world in which, as Kafka asserted in a conversation with Gustav Janouch, men and women are "sleep-walkers, not evildoers."<sup>11</sup>

Kafka reveals a world in which there is a blind alley, "no exit," of a systemic "nausea" of unattainable relief: such as that of a concentration camp (in which Kafka's own three sisters perished in the early 1940s) that has become a geopolitical reality that, in time, slides into a gulag. The faces of modernism have the same diabolism, the same Luciferian grimace. K.'s quest for salvation attains no savior, whether of an ethical, of a theological, or of a messianic nature. This is the savior Kafka describes in his reflection, "The Coming of the Messiah": "The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last." Salvation in *The Castle* typifies the eternal paradox that for K. is imaged as a pursuit without end. As one character expresses it in the novel: "we're in a bad way, our whole world is in ruins, and once we begin to complain we're farther than we realize. "

Kafka's vision is not a macrocosmic vision, if by which we mean an encapsulating vision of depth and magnitude, of piercing vatic or tragicomic insight, a vision that has no set perimeters

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<sup>10</sup> See Zadie Smith, "'The Limited Circle Is Pure': Franz Kafka versus the Novel," *The New Republic*, November 3, 2003, 33-40.

<sup>11</sup> Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, translated from the German by Goronwy Rees (New York, 1971), 58.

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and that attains temporal and spatial heights and depths. His vision is both restrictive and constrictive. And contrary to what some critics claim, Kafka's is neither a sapiential nor a hallow vision that leads to acceptance and affirmation; that crosses the frontier into the "far country," there to separate the demonic from the divine, the profane from the sacred, in their true attributes. In Kafka these attributes constantly extinguish each other, each attribute inevitably emptied of any axiomatic factor. The modern world, Kafka confesses to us, is a repudiation of all finality of humane value since the very stuff of value is intrinsically ambiguous and ambivalent, disjointed and disconnected. As such, Kafka's art is incapable of pointing the way, insofar as there is no way since, as he notes in his diary dated October 21, 1921, "all is imaginary. . . . the truth that lies closest, however, is only this, that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell."<sup>12</sup>

His message in the end is one that cancels out vision itself and personifies lacerating doubt, as crystallized in one of Kafka's memorable "parables" describing how one citizen, on a very early morning, is on the way to the station, the time being much later than he thought. Feeling uncertain of the way and unacquainted with the particular location, the citizen asks directions from a nearby policeman. "'You asking me the way?'" the officer says. "'Yes,' I said, since I can't find it myself.' 'Give it up!' 'Give it up!' said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter." The policeman's words, it can be asserted, disclose a great deal about the limits of Kafka's vision and also about his own view of its fragmentariness and abnegation. "Give it up!"

*Lacerating  
doubt  
personified.*

The Castle itself is a monstrous bureaucratic image, and nothing and no one in it can provide any final truth—"only a few scraps of truth could be picked up" about its activities or decisions, and these came to nothing. One, like Barnabas, is unable to get authorities to listen to his appeals for an opportunity for a secure position in the Castle. For him hope and failure are no less different than hoping and waiting for the slightest sign of amelio-

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<sup>12</sup> *The Basic Kafka*, introduction by Erich Heller (New York: First Pocket Books, 1979), 262. Other quotations from Kafka's writings—shorter fiction, parables, personal diaries, and letters—included in the text of this essay—are from this valuable edition, unless otherwise indicated.

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ration. Everything is for naught, as one waits and waits and waits for nothing: “. . . all that useless standing about and waiting all day, and day after day, and going on and on without any prospect of change, must break a man down and make him unsure of himself and in the end actually incapable of anything else but this hopeless standing about.”

That there is no terminal point in terms of consummation or of fulfillment is a principal feature of *The Castle* and also of Kafka's world view. Observing “those very questionable officials,” into whose room Barnabas was allowed, gave him an “exalted idea” of their authority. Yet even within the bureau “deceptions are more frequent than changes.” Thus, too, the two letters Barnabas delivers to K. can never be appraised as to their genuine worth since “they themselves change in value perpetually,” and in effect betray K.'s “only hope.”

*What matters does not matter, even as what is, is not.*

It is interesting, too, to observe that movement itself in *The Castle* shows the same stagnation that affects the expression of emotions in its inhabitants. There is no measurable movement in an active sense of taking a step forward or backward, for it seems that a step taken in either direction results in indirection, which Kafka images in these words in *Amerika*: “at the end of each flight of stairs, another would begin in a slightly different direction.” Nothing appears to be accomplished, as if there is an unceasing stalemate no matter what activity a character seeks to fulfill. Nor does it matter what happens since the element of powerlessness prevails in everything and in everyone. What matters does not matter, even as what is, is not, as K. discovers.

The people K. comes into contact with exist as in a vacuum, or in a dream—or in a hospital; “sickness unto death” and death in life are the inclusive state of being here. Even Kafka's occasional scenes of passion involving K. and Frieda are wooden and lifeless, so much so that *eros* itself is vacuous—or meaningless. Indeed, at one point, an unhappy Frieda says to K.: ““You always persecute me; oh, K., why do you always persecute me? Never, never will I go back to you, I shudder when I think of such a possibility.””

Beauty of place and of people is an unknown and unseen quality in *The Castle*; physical distinctiveness is absent, though what is distinctly grotesque, or bizarre, is never lacking. Sordidness permeates the human scene. The Castle itself is painted in a kind of

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daily grey that is in keeping with its bureaucratic *aparatchiks*, or “lawyers and secretaries,” who work in dreary rooms, which are more often like a network of cells in an underground world where records and documents keep multiplying, of which the note-pad is a fitting symbol. K.’s encounter with one such official, Bürgel, crystallizes the heaviness and the oppressive monotony of the bureaucratic process during “night interrogations” as “an indispensable necessity”: “‘Why all this? Why all this?’ he wondered, and from under lowered eyelids considered Bürgel not like an official discussing difficult questions with him, but only like something that was preventing him from sleeping and whose further meaning he could not discover.”

Some critics are wont to say, for example, that “Kafka’s multiple interpretations are all possible options within one world,” that they are to be read “from successive views, as the operations of a mind which keeps correcting itself,” and that ultimately they demonstrate “how elusive is the truth.” Still, the fact is that K.’s innocuous pursuit of salvation desperately underlines his employment of any possible stratagem that will be more or less potentially beneficial to him, but also one that has no higher aim shaped by an abiding concern with ascent. Kafka’s exegetes, in this respect, are much too generous in their estimations of the beneficent qualities of his vision. Clearly, the moral vision that is a central aspect of, say, Joseph Conrad’s fiction, can simply not be located in Kafka: is not a major or viable dimension. What these critics seem to be doing is to absolve the artist from moral responsibility by refusing to see that his position is concurrently an embracement and an indictment of the modern world in all of its dominion, a sovereign world absolved of its faults, or sins, or shortcomings, which Kafka portrays in the form of the utter elusiveness and the utter fear of truth and absolute value.

As such, Kafka’s world is sometimes not seen for what it really is: a modern world in which moral effort is endlessly diluted or betrayed, exposed to fluid interpretation and abstract explanation. And as such his vision, its powers of imagination notwithstanding, is also not seen for what it really is: a rendering of modernist excrescences, animadversions, antinomies, anomalies, in short, for the damage it does to the virtue of order. Such a vision is one in which stratagems become the guiding principle of action and thought. K.’s quest itself is essentially one of manipulation and

*The modern world in all of its dominion concurrently embraced and indicted.*

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maneuvers, of stratagems that illustrate its lexical definition: “an artifice or trick designed to outwit or surprise the enemy,” “a device or scheme for obtaining an advantage.” No quest better quintessentializes the stuff of modernism in a situation that epitomizes Edmund Burke’s “antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, and unavailing sorrow.”

*Kafka both registers and bows to spiritual catastrophism.*

To assert that Kafka’s vision of the world celebrates presentism is no exaggeration, *pace* his literary interpreters who, regardless of their sometimes intriguing and alluring theories, lack the courage of discerning the spiritual catastrophism which Kafka registers, and to which he bows. Critics and readers who skirt this considerable flaw in his vision and also in K.’s quest in *The Castle* fail to pinpoint the modernist impasse that he creates as a kind of imaginative superstructure—that itself emerges as an inverted kind of “metamorphosis.” Clearly, Kafka’s vision requires not rationalizations or superlatives, but diligent measurement and scrutiny.

In meeting with different officials, whether with a Bürgel or with an Erlanger, K. feels “the futility of all his endeavors.” “If Erlanger waves you off, what are you going to do? And if he does not wave you off, what could you say to him?” Servants endlessly transport files on little carts to be distributed, as shouting, muttering, clattering, with the ringing of bells from within the rooms and the corridors act as accompaniment—along with the incessant opening and shutting of doors adding to the din and noise. The entire scene is routinely ugly and discordant, to the point that K. finds unendurable, even as the “gentlemen” find *him* an unendurable presence in the passage.

Having to go through two interrogations, K. has reached the stage of utter exhaustion: “By the time he was done with the second interrogation he had really been walking in a sort of swoon.” At the conclusion of this particular episode, a very tired K. falls asleep for twelve hours on a board placed across some barrels. Nothing has been accomplished, nothing has been resolved, as this somnambulant scene emphasizes.

### III

To read Kafka’s text as, say, a religio-spiritual allegory strains its significance if what is canonically and authentically religious has axiomatic principles and disciplinary traditions and values. It is

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imperative, then, to insist on strictly defining and evaluating the application of terms like “salvation,” “religion,” “religious” in any critical assessment of Kafka’s visionary elements in his fiction. No less than contemporary publicists’ abuse of a word like icon, literary critics who choose to depict Kafka as a “profound religious thinker” and fantasist need to be faulted for looseness of language in their literary adjudications. (“Religion,” Muir thus claims, “was . . . the whole world to him—or rather he saw the total sum of possible experience in terms of religion.”)<sup>13</sup> The religious constituents of artistic vision, in this respect, call for a greater exactitude of language and meaning, if logocentric criteria are to be defended against peculiarly deconstructive projects.

In one sense, in fact, Kafka can be labeled a pre-deconstructionist novelist whose work culminates in the negation of humane aspirations and a shared belief in values. *The Castle* can aptly be summed up as “encounters with nothingness” in which there is a categorical repudiation of any solid and firm foundations, which are at the same time crumbling and disappearing. Kafka is unable to identify with or belong to the human world, to *humanitas*. His vision is decreative. In one of his parables, “My Destination,” to the servant’s question, “Where are you riding to, Master?” the latter’s reply is: “I don’t know. . . . Away-From-Here, that is my destination.”

*Humane aspirations and shared belief in values negated.*

Cacophony is still another infliction suffered in *The Castle*: “. . . always the same, abuse and threats. . . . And never any peace, either by day or by night, noise going on half through the night and noise again by the crack of dawn.” Kafka concretizes this cacophony with auditory detail memorably found in the twentieth chapter of the novel describing the chambermaids doing their cleaning chores in the secretaries’ rooms and being pitilessly reproached for causing the loss of files. (“What did the maids care about files?”) Torment and fear assail the chambermaids for days on end, at whatever the time; “fainting in terror,” “in their little rooms or in the gentlemen’s rooms,” they are at the beck and call of the demanding officials: “Always suddenly the first thumping on the chambermaids’ door, the order being dictated, the running down to the kitchen, shaking the sleeping scullery lads . . . how sad all that was!” Feelings of terror are ever present even in the

*Feelings of terror ever present.*

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<sup>13</sup> Muir, “Franz Kafka,” in *Kafka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 33, 36.

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dead of night when constant “tiptoeing around began outside the chambermaids’ door,” as the girls jolted from their beds in a crowded room no bigger than a large cupboard, “listened at the door, knelt down, put their arms around one another in fear.” Yet, “nothing happened, no one came in,” and this caused uncanny fear of the nameless and the unknown: “Perhaps that was all it was, but perhaps it was something quite different.”

No scene better vivifies Kafka’s ability to describe the tyranny of the modern predicament, those “indissoluble contradictions of being” that instance the origins and end of the crisis of modernity. Here Kafka discloses a strong talent for showing how the senses are violated especially in the “gentlemen’s rooms,” with their “artificial light” and “stuffy air,” “the heating always on.” Life in an infernal realm is what we find here. A feeling of heaviness permeates the atmosphere; the men and women pictured are like denizens of the underworld, their coarseness and crudeness inescapable, lacking any human appeal. Lowly menservants, kitchenmaids, chambermaids, and barmaids stalk the premises in their patched-up clothing, looking “sluttish.” And throughout, scenes of an endemic debasement are unalleviating; and there is a sameness of mood in what takes place and in the actions of Kafka’s people (“misused” and “deceived”), flat characters who show no sign of growth or of any deep understanding of interpersonal relations. Frieda’s abandonment of K. embodies the fragility of human connection. The virtue of loyalty simply does not exist in *The Castle*, or if it does, just barely; it is purely ephemeral, manipulative, expedient.

Kafka’s fiction registers the desiccation of lived experience; there is no realization of revived feeling or tenderness, no fourth-dimensional quality or numinous expression of the epiphanic. By the conclusion of the unfinished manuscript there is no alleviation of K.’s dilemma or of the picture of villagers with whom K. is involved. Kafka did not live to write a concluding chapter to *The Castle*, but given what he did write it would be hard to imagine any major change of mood or of tone. Max Brod reports that Kafka told him once how the novel was to end, with K. at last finding some relief: “He was not to relax in his struggle, but was to die worn out by it.” Though K. lacked the legal right to live in the village, the Castle authorities, “taking certain auxiliary circumstances into account,” finally permitted him to live and

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work there. But at this particular point, we also learn, K. is on his deathbed, a Kafkaesque detail that cannot be minimized.<sup>14</sup>

The overall feeling that remains with the reader is as tenuous and vague as that experienced in the novel's entire story line. At the end of the novel, as at the beginning, K. encounters the coachman Gerstäcker ("this stooping and somehow ill-used figure with the thin, red, tired face and cheeks that were different") who asks K.: "'Where are you going? Where are you going?'"—his words unpleasantly interspersed with sighs and coughs." Finding the way is still cruelly elusive, and it is as if K. has come full circle. "The true way," we read in one of Kafka's aphorisms, "goes over a rope which is not stretched at any great height but just above the ground. It seems more designed to make people stumble than to be walked upon."

K.'s ending declarative sentence here discloses at least part of Kafka's liminary vision, his steadfast refusal to allow for any existential breakthrough or to accept any possibility of one's finding a place in the universe—for "This is how it is." For Kafka, keeping open the womb of the negative or exhausting the limits of the possible is an utter impossibility; neither the world nor humankind has a higher meaning or deeper ethical center. (Kafka's influence on Samuel Beckett, the Irish-born French dramatist, and on Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish filmmaker, is easily delectable.) The cruel realities of Kafka's vision, so forcefully confirmed in *The Castle*, ultimately overwhelm anything that makes life worth living, or comprehensible. "The individual can do nothing, and yet he can do everything," Albert Camus declares; the second part of his statement, however, is inconceivable for Kafka, for whom there are impassable walls that point to the suffocating power of his darksome perspective, or as Kafka writes in the diary entry dated September 30, 1915, "the innocent and the guilty [are] both executed without distinction in the end."

"Give it up!" "This is how it is." "Guilt is always certain." "Away-From-Here, that is my destination." These are the unchanging features of Kafka's view of things; they are also signs that lead to the end of nowhere. No matter how profound Kafka's

*For Kafka, humankind has no higher meaning or ethical center.*

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<sup>14</sup> These words are quoted from the Editor's Note to the first English edition by Max Brod, and appear in the Publisher's Note to Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, the Definitive Edition, translated from the German by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1995).

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vision of nowhere is, it is ultimately annihilative. Beyond this point of no return, Kafka's vision negates those principles and values that, when rejected or discredited or leveled, reveal that the consequences of the artist's absorption in the nihilist imagination are irrevocable and irremediable, when Kafka's castle becomes a necropolis that consumes both the history and the meaning of human existence.

Kafka's view of the world heralds both modernity in its major phase and evolution and the twentieth century in all of its quandaries and cataclysms as these have been enacted to the most violent extremes. *The Castle* itself contains astonishing intimations of a postmodernism that dictates ahistorical reasoning, moral nihilism and relativism, and what Professor Claes Ryn identifies as "antihistorical universalism," unconditionally antagonistic to a historically based common human ground and to any belief in a universal purpose of human existence. "In some of its forms," Ryn observes, "postmodernism can be seen as conducive to an obliteration of individual identity—a prescription for madness."<sup>15</sup> K.'s failed stratagems personify, prophetically, this "prescription for madness," especially as portrayed in his struggle in the concluding pages of *The Castle* in which solipsism and alienation incite the narrative mood.

*Man's inward terrain is for Kafka no less squalid than the exterior world.*

In 1923, in the last months of his life before his death from laryngeal tuberculosis, Kafka wrote an extraordinary short story entitled "The Burrow," in which his basic preoccupations and narrative technique remain consistent.<sup>16</sup> This story relates a downward movement, "digging the pit of Babel," as he phrases it. It is a story that distinctly complements and reinforces *The Castle*; seen together, the novel and the story give us Kafka's labyrinthine vision in its internal geography, if not its ecology. The inward terrain is for him no less squalid, no less fearsome, and no less imprisoning and sunless than the exterior world. Physical disorder and moral disorder are both equivalent and invariable; upward and downward motions are structurally unavailing, and have the same grim results.

Certitude and safety are totally missing in the burrow, which

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<sup>15</sup> Claes Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia, Missouri, 2003), 132-133.

<sup>16</sup> The complete text of "The Burrow," in English translation, is included in *The Basic Kafka*, 90-127.

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Kafka's subhuman protagonist, in the shape of a large mole, is building to protect itself from being encircled and ambushed by the enemy, a powerful and preying beast. Though this burrow is presumably the mole's castle keep, it is, more importantly, "this great vulnerable edifice," this "pit of Babel," with its tunnels and fortresses filled with terror; indeed, Kafka's mole perhaps perceives its foe as Dread itself. The mole builds its hole out of fear of being destroyed by an enemy coming from some "quite unexpected quarter." Indeed, its "enemies are countless; it could well happen that in flying from one enemy I might run into the jaws of another. Anything might happen."

For the mole, therefore, "external enemies" are as threatening as are the enemies prowling "in the bowels of the earth." Though it sleeps for long hours, the mole's night labors seem to have no end; even on awakening "[I] find hanging from my jaws, say, a rat." The mole feels that it can only trust itself and its burrow in a world that brings constant perils manifested in "endless time." This world of danger (for "anything might happen"), the mole knows, "is full of diversity and is never wanting in painful surprises." Since anything, then, can occur in an omni-adversarial situation, this means working zealously to defend one's self against even the slightest possibility of attack from the unknown beast.

As the mole ages, it sees itself as "an old architect," persistently striving to meet "the decisive hour" and aware that "the great burrow stands defenseless" as "the whistling" has grown ominously loud. His surroundings "seem filled with agitation," and no "solution" emerges; the beast has not turned away—all has "remained unchanged." There is no sustaining rest, no solace, either for the mole or for the beast; and at the precise moment that they see each other or merely guess each other's presence, "we shall both blindly bare our claws and teeth, neither of us a second before or after the other, both of us filled with a new and different hunger. . . ."

Kafka's use of insect and animal imagery underscores human degradation. In this respect, he differs from George Orwell, who in *Animal Farm* (1945) uses the beast fable to satirize "oligarchical collectivism." He also differs from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who employs animal imagery in *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973-1975) in order to stress the brutalizing effects of the terrors of Bolshevik

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Infinite  
desolation and  
dread the  
benchmarks of  
Kafka's art.

ideology. "The Burrow," like *The Castle*, presents to us a place of infinite desolation and dread, conditions that are the benchmarks of Kafka's art. He himself is ultimately the pitiless recreator of the grotesqueries of nullity, or as Kafka observed, with stark honesty and without delusion: "Balzac carried a cane on which was carved the legend: I smash every obstacle; my legend reads: Every obstacle smashes me."

Ultimately, Kafka's fictional universe, which can be visualized as a huge burrow, registers the effects of the distance from and the absence of God, and shows a lack of any natural or moral fortitude in the face of guilt, immobility, danger. To be sure, Kafka discloses the autochthonous bent of the artist who unflinchingly portrays the great divide between God and man, and yet of one who accepts, or resigns himself to this overwhelming fact: that human existence lingers in deprivation and uncertainty. Kafka's vision revolves around a world in torment, and it emerges from an underlying distrust of the world. Art for him replaces God and Salvation, and ultimately it expresses his religious credo.

Max Brod asserts that *The Castle* reflects Kafka's Jewish origins and is the story of the modern situation of Jewry.<sup>17</sup> Brod's largely hagiographic interpretations fail, nonetheless, to bridge the wide gulf that exists between identifying Kafka with Job rather than with the great Hebrew prophets; between, that is, the unanswered questions of suffering and anguish evoked by Job, and the prophets' utterance of the repentance and atonement that are at the ontological center of their mission and message. Compassion for man and sympathy for God, which Rabbi Abraham Heschel highlights as mainstays of prophecy, are manifestly missing from Kafka's artistic imagination—an omission that necessarily reduces his religious message and constricts the full reach of his aesthetic.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Max Brod, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, translated from the German by G. H. Roberts and Richard Winston (New York, 1960), Chapter VI, "Religious Development," 168-195. Writing in 1992, Irving Howe states that, though he has no argument with commentators who emphasize Kafka's "Jewish concerns," he nonetheless believes that the "'distinctive quandaries of Jewish existence' . . . have become quandaries for all of mankind," and that "Kafka must finally be taken as a writer of universal significance . . . [whose] novels and stories lose a great deal if narrowed to the terms of a particular doctrine or theology." Introduction, *The Castle*, the Definitive Edition, published by Schocken Books, New York, in 1995, xiii-xiv.

<sup>18</sup> See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1962).

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No reading of Kafka's fiction can avoid the recognition of this paradox. The "problem of Kafka" continues the "old problem of Job" in modern guise, and reaches no resolution, however much Brod and other apologists champion Kafka's "gentle disposition."

*Kafka not  
religious in  
soul or  
rendered  
vision.*

In *The Castle* we see in K. an isolated figure who shows absolutely no trace of a Biblical dimension. To be sure, there are aspects of Kafka's novels that can be, and are, extrapolated and perceived as the historical fate of Jewry. In the end, however, Kafka's fiction underscores not only K.'s own spiritual vacuum but also the incurable inertia that, as Buber states, "is the root of all evil."<sup>19</sup> Of course, Kafka should not be dismissed as an "unredeemed Jew" or as one totally oblivious of Jewish religious life or of religious life in general. The point is that he is not truly religious in his soul or in his rendered vision. "I was not led into life by the sinking hand of Christianity, like Kierkegaard," he confesses, "nor did I catch the last of the Jewish prayer-shawl before it flew away, like the Zionists. I am the end or the beginning."

To overestimate Kafka's Jewish roots or import is a rebuttal of the religious imagination or, for that matter, the moral imagination. First and last, Kafka placed his faith not in "the way of the Jewish faith," or in the idea of the *yihud*, or divine unity, but in Literature: as an artist, sitting "in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar," and striving to "keep a clear vision." His life, like his commitment, centered in his art, his "form of prayer," his *raison d'être*, his medium of salvation, or as he wrote to his first fiancée, Félice Bauerr: "I consist of literature and am unable to be anything else. I *am* literature." The artist alone, he contended, can "raise the world into the pure, the true, and the immutable." Indeed, as Kafka was to write to Max Brod on July 5, 1922, the existence of a writer "is an argument against the existence of the soul, for the soul has obviously taken flight from the real ego, but not improved itself, only become a writer."

*First and last,  
Kafka placed  
his faith in  
Literature.*

The writer, Kafka insists, with a peculiarly Joycean fervor, testifies to the ultimate sacrifice and martyrdom. "He is the scapegoat of mankind. He makes it possible for men to enjoy sin without guilt, almost without guilt." Writing, he adds, "is the reward for serving the devil. This descent to the dark powers, this unshackling of spirits bound by nature, these dubious embraces and

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Buber, "The Faith of Judaism," in *The Writings of Martin Buber*, selected, edited, and introduced by Will Herberg (Cleveland, Ohio, 1956), 257.

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whatever else may take place in the nether parts. . . .<sup>20</sup> *The Castle* dramatizes Kafka's travels to the remote regions of the universe, as he peers into "the horror of life" and converts it into "the terror of art."

In its temper and technique, Kafka's literary art—and even his own notebook drawings in the *art nouveau* style—was to anticipate Surrealism as expounded by André Breton (1896-1966), in his *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924), which defined this modern French movement as "pure psychic automatism" and "the dictation of thought free from any control by the reason and of any aesthetic or moral preoccupation." In eliminating differences between dream and reality, sanity and madness, good and evil, the Surrealists sought to express in visual art, literature, and philosophy subconscious thought and feelings through fantastic imagery, unnatural juxtapositions, or bizarre combinations. But above all, Surrealism disclosed the growing disappearance in modern times of both the idea, or criterion, of value and of the place of spiritual and moral virtues in a humane civilization. One critic goes so far as to describe Surrealism as an "equivalent for the sacking of towns."<sup>21</sup> Certainly in Kafka's fiction the abundance of both "non-oriented states of soul" and phantasmagoria are significant surrealist prefigurations.

Some critics persist in their attempts to demonstrate Kafka's Judaism as a "rediscovered" ground of being and as a gradual affirmation of his Jewish loyalties. The content of his fictive texts does not, however, validate an interiorized Judaism, or a "turning" to the mystery of God. A glance at Kafka's autobiographical "Letter to My Father" (November 1919) communicates a chilling indictment of his father's "insignificant fragments of Judaism." Kafka observes that he could not in fact understand his father's reproachments of his son without "making an effort to put the same insignificant fragments into practice. It was really, as far as I could see, nothing, a joke, not even a joke." Yet, an equivalent "insignificant scrap" characterizes Kafka's own religious faith, which is for him "like a guillotine, as heavy, as light." His is hardly a

Kafka  
dismissed his  
father's  
Judaism as  
"nothing, a  
joke, not even  
a joke."

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<sup>20</sup> See Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, edited by Max Brod, translated from the German by Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1977), 332-335.

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, "The Responsibility of Writers," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George A. Panichas (New York, 1977), 288.

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consummately reverential and living Judaism that either infuses or saves his creative imagination; any claim that it does ignores the profane ingredients that control and write his vision. To contend, therefore, that Kafka conveys “Jewish feelings” and sympathies does not prove that these are intrinsically open to divine otherness and to revelation. He himself admitted to “the absence of any firm Jewish ground under my feet.”<sup>22</sup>

Clearly the Jewish Bible does not inspire Kafka’s vision in the way the Christian Gospel inspires Dostoevsky’s burden of vision. Indeed the contrasts between *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Castle*, that is, between transcending belief and ravaging doubt, speak profound truths. To the end, Kafka saw himself as a victim of “vague hope, vague confidence.” “My life is a hesitation before birth,” he writes, as he also goes on to acknowledge the lifelong feeling of terror he experienced. “I have been forty years wandering from Canaan. . . . I am the wretchedest of creatures in the desert too,” he adds, “and Canaan is perforce my only Promised land, for no third place exists for mankind.” He composed these words at the end of 1921 and early in 1922. He would die on June 3, 1924, in a private sanatorium in Kierling, near Vienna, and would be buried in a simple ceremony on June 11, 1924, in the Jewish cemetery of Olgany in Straschnitz, on the outskirts of Prague. His afflicted vision would rule out any presumption that the soul of Dr. Franz Kafka had at last passed into “the soul of Judaism” to find eternal repose in the third ground, the holy ground.

*Contrasts  
between  
Dostoevsky’s  
transcending  
belief and  
Kafka’s  
ravaging  
doubt speak  
profound  
truths.*

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Frederick Karl, *Franz Kafka: Representative Man* (New York, 1991), 712.