GÜNTHER ANDERS

From Franz Kafka†

II. The Literal Metaphor

Kafka's stories are neither allegorical nor symbolic

Of the complex of problems surrounding Kafka's writings two in particular will require closer consideration: first, the phenomenon of time-paralysis, for on this depends the 'beauty' of his work; and secondly, the problem of inverted guilt and punishment, for this contains in nuce his moral theory and moral theology. The usual titles for such topics would be, perhaps, 'Kafka the Artist', and 'Kafka as homo religious'.

Before tackling these themes, however, we should do well to examine the actual language in which Kafka presents them: the language, so it would appear, of some mysterious allegory or symbolism. How is it to be understood, and what are its rules? By what grammar of the mind are the things of 'this' world rendered in terms of 'his' world? Or is perhaps Kafka's literary method a process sui generis, which does not fall into either of the accepted categories of allegory or symbolism?

We began by proposing the idea that 'distortion', in Kafka's work as in a scientific experiment, is a means to further knowledge about the world. As it stands this thesis is inadequate. For even if an experimental technique produces results, we shall still not have penetrated nature's secrets unless we understand exactly what our technique is and does. We must therefore elucidate the principle by which Kafka translates reality into his own idiom.

The writer of allegory follows rules laid down by convention, often of mythical or religious origin, in order to substitute an image in place of a concept. The true symbolist takes partem pro toto, i.e. he represents one object by another because one is supposed to share the substance, indeed to contain the essence of the other. Kafka does neither of these things. What he translates into images are not concepts, but situations. On the other hand, he cannot be said to create symbols in the usual way either; for symbols can be used only by a writer whose sense of the totality of things, of the innate bonds, the 'sym' which links them, and of the place of his own experience within a divine or natural scheme, remains intact. The fact that the majority of interpreters, prompted by a dislike of the cold rationality

difficulty is due simply to obscurity in this or that metaphor or to an impossible jumble of metaphors. It will at all events not be surprising if he decides that Kafka's short fables which are 'all of a piece' are more nearly perfect as works of art than the novels with their rich confusion of imagery.

That different metaphors may be superimposed on one another is not, however, the only difficulty that confronts the interpreter of Kafka. For there are also several even of the shorter stories which do not immediately yield their meaning, because they are, so to speak, locked with several keys at once. Even when every one of the keys is available to us, the door may still not open, because we are incapable of using all of them at the same time. Or, to put the matter a different way: there often occurs especially in the novels what is known in music as an 'enharmonic modulation'. In the course of the story a person or object whose existence is to be explained in terms of one metaphor takes on another metaphorical nuance; the 'D sharp' suddenly becomes an 'E flat'. But since this person or thing still preserves an apparently constant identity in itself throughout the story, its total significance becomes obscure. Or does its total significance not then consist precisely in this two-sidedness or ambiguity? As we have seen, for Kafka ambiguity is a dominant mode of experience: the world is for him in all its aspects an object both of fear and of desire.

Thus, the law courts in The Trial stand for two different things. On the one hand, the poor, whose very existence makes K. feel his own existence to be in itself 'guilty'. It is no accident that the courtrooms are situated in the attics of Pauper's Road, in practically every alms-house. On the other hand, in closest possible contact with the courts stand many members of that other 'world', the ruling class, and particularly those who regard K.'s social conscience as a disgrace. This ambivalence leads us to suppose again that Kafka's conscience is doubly burdened with guilt, both because he does not share the fate of the very poor, and also because he does not properly belong to the 'world'—because he is somehow inadequate. He never resolved in his own mind this dilemma of conscience; and it is scarcely too much to say that the metaphor of the 'high' court is meant to cover the vagueness of his moral position, and to elevate his indecision to the level of a paradox.

**KAFKA'S CHARACTERS ARE NOT MORE ABSTRACT THAN REAL PEOPLE: THEY ARE PEOPLE ATTACHED TO A JOB**

Kafka, then, is not writing allegory. But are not Kafka's characters as much abstractions as those in allegory, close relatives, in fact, of those talking virtues and vices portrayed by Bunyan? Is not the reason why Kafka's work is obscure simply that he puts before us a private collection of metaphors which he has assembled ad hoc whereas Bunyan could take over his figures and situations from the familiar allegorical world of Christian theology?

Certainly, there is something abstract about the figures Kafka draws. But this abstraction must be understood less as a literary convention than as a real condition. Whereas allegory presents humanized abstractions, Kafka's stories represent abstract human beings. These men and women are 'abstract' in the sense suggested by the original Latin word *abstrahere*: they have been removed, torn away from the fulness of human existence. Many of them are indeed nothing but functions: this man is a messenger and nothing else, that woman is a useful contact and nothing else. But this state of being no more than one's 'function' is not an invention of Kafka's; it has its precedent in the modern world where a man only counts in terms of some minor specialized function, so that he really is this job, reduced by the division of labour to a 'bit part' devoid of character. The average realistic novelist makes little use of this fact and usually contrives the action of his novel in such a way that the professional function of the character is kept out of sight. He may even be said to falsify reality by portraying his characters as full and complete individuals. We can see now that Kafka's 'marionettes' are prophetically enacting through their grotesque selves and experiences the most ghastly occurrences of our time. Societies have reached the dreadful stage where a man who has no particular function to perform may be regarded as not real, as nothing, as unworthy of life. Death in concentration camps has been the fate of those to whom society could not or would not assign a particular function.

Many nineteenth-century novels, by ignoring or trivializing the importance of a man's profession (or by taking for their hero that exceptional example of the complete man, the artist), imply that a man's real self exists only outside his profession. Kafka goes to the opposite extreme and shows a man's profession as his exclusive mode of existence, and man as completely swallowed up by it. In this way the concept of profession acquires something of the absolute character of a religious vocation. And this gives rise to a striking similarity between Kafka's picture of man and that represented by Calvinist doctrine. What a man 'really' is—the question despairingly asked by existentialism—Kafka neither asks nor answers, simply because there is no room for this 'real' person in the 'professional' world he describes. *Imperator omnium imperator*: the emperor is emperor even while he sleeps. Kafka makes this identification of man and profession in the modern world absurdly obvious, by inventing absurd professions; but the point is no less true—it only does not strike us as abnormal—in the case of everyday professions. In a
story which Kafka wrote when he was only twenty-five, Conversation with a Praying Man, this man says, 'It is the purpose of my life to be gazed upon by others.' What self remains to pray, if the man is nothing but the figure, the function of a praying man?

'I have been appointed as a beater, so I beat,' a man explains (in The Trial), who, as a result of K.'s unwitting guilt, is made to spend his days beating two officials. Thirty-five years ago, when Kafka created this character, it was felt to be the work of a sadist, some perverse oddity of imagination to be explained by psychoanalysis. The ordinary reader rejected such figures as unreal, because they were nothing but functions and because, without the slightest trace of a moral conscience, they no longer really acted but merely obeyed. Today we have heard the answer, the same kind of answer as Kafka had already put into the mouths of his 'mad' characters, from men employed not only to beat but to exterminate, when they were put on trial at Nuremberg. It is the reply of those deprived of their power, of those who are irresponsible because no responsibility is left to them—in short, of those who do not really live but whose lives are used by others.

If a man is nothing but his profession, if his being is nothing more than the role for which he is 'cut out', then he himself is indeed a nonentity, existing not in his own right but, as it were, by permission of the authorities, an authorized copy of his own official papers. Compared with these documents, which are the token of his reality in the administrative world, the individual (L'homme attaché à sa carte d'identité, as a French author formulated it fifteen years later) is as valueless as the actual phenomenon compared with its Platonic Idea. This bureaucratic Platonism is anything but a farce of Kafka's invention. That a man having no original document to which he corresponds can count as socially non-existent is now simply a fact of history, just as it is a fact that men employed as torturers will do this job like any other. Here, indeed, Kafka has proved to be a prophetic realist.

Yet again there is an ambiguous element in his inspiration. Mixed with the despair he feels at the sight of man as a mere functionary, there is also envy and yearning. From the point of view of the hero who has no function (and this is largely Kafka's own view) it appears that the only people who are real and adult are those who have a definite occupation and purpose in society, and who identify themselves with their job. Ask a man with a profession what he 'is' and he will say: 'I am an architect' or 'I am an innkeeper'. Kafka's characters are certainly not mere allegorical concepts; they are men for whom it is as impossible to be separated from their function as it is for a table to become a chair. Kafka was so absolutely unsure about what his own place in society really was, that he inevitably relished the idea of rigid classifications. When he identified a man with his profession this was not realism only but also the projection of an inner wish.

KAFKA'S AGNOSTICISM IS BORN OF POWERLESSNESS, FOR TO BE POWERLESS IS TO BE UNINFORMED

The entanglement or clash of metaphors often obscures the sense of Kafka's stories, and sometimes obliterates it altogether; just as a conglomeration of sign-posts would mean nothing as a whole despite what might be plainly written on each one.

There is, however, another reason for the obscurity of events in Kafka's writings, and for the consequent difficulty of interpretation. It lies in the fact that the majority of his characters never know where they stand and are confronted by fundamentally incalculable situations. Kafka gives the impression that he himself can see no further than they—as if he really knew no more than these creatures of his imagination! In this assumption of ignorance he is very much more rigorous and consistent than any other author who may have pretended to disguise his 'omniscience'. Kafka 'does not know' with an intensity which is truly agnostic, and this agnosticism is to be explained in terms again of his feeling that he has no rights. Since his characters are without rights they do not deserve to know, to be informed; they are not worthy to be told what their civil status is, for instance, despite the reign of a Super-bureaucracy. When they say, 'one never knows', what they really mean is 'one has no right to know' Kafka's agnosticism is a matter of rights, a political phenomenon.

If no one knows who he is, this would seem to contradict our earlier assertion that Kafka's characters are identical with their profession, their official status. But the experience of any totalitarian state shows how this contradiction may exist in reality. It is part of the human ignominy of Kafka's world that, although each individual depends for his existence upon being an official employee, no one enjoys the right to see through the role he plays in the bureaucratic whole. A man is taken account of and allowed to 'be' only in so far as he is a means: thus he himself has no access to truth, and lives as an agnostic. In this way a total absence of freedom becomes synonymous with agnosticism.

If a man does not know what position he is in nor where he is going, what he owes nor to whom, what he may be suspected of, or why he is accused, or whether or not he is tolerated (if so, for how long, if not, on what authority), then all his energies will be consumed by an unrequiting search for meaning, a kind of mania for interpretation. No event will be so insignificant, no gesture so fleeting, that it does not at once provoke the question, 'What does this
mean? This mania for interpretation is thus the stigma of the individual deprived of power; of one who (to adopt an old saying) must forever interpret the world because others rule and change it.

At the same time it also gives Kafka a chance to display his literary art. Interpretation opens a door into the limitless spaces of if-clauses and subjunctives, and often a story is largely created out of such an excursion into hypothesis; the mania for interpretation becomes a logical fantasy. The story *Up in the Gallery* begins with such an ‘if’: the subjunctive, offspring of uncertainty, establishes its sovereignty and grows into a masterpiece of short-story writing.

The prose-piece entitled *The Sudden Walk* (in *Reflections*) is another example: consisting of a single enormous sentence, it is ‘introduced’ by an if-clause of twenty-four lines. To achieve the effect of precision, Kafka divides this if-clause into nine coordinated if-clauses, and these in turn into others. The weight of the main clause following these ‘ifs’ is insignificant by comparison.

This discrepancy between the significance of what ‘might be’ and the insignificance of what ‘is’ characterizes the fate of those condemned to live in a world where they can consider many possibilities, but yet lack the authority to decide between them. Theirs is a state for which ‘slavery’ is too primitive a word since it prompts the mind to think only of external circumstances. Such people are in a condition that had best be called simply ‘unfreedom’, in which ‘mere possibility’ ceases to be hypothetical and insubstantial. Their free will, their capacity either to realize an idea or to reject it, becomes paralysed. And so these unrealized possibilities, which they cannot dispose of, begin to haunt them, assuming the character of real things that seem to demand description. Thus, Kafka’s meticulous elaboration of conditional clauses is yet another symptom of the absence of personal will, the most striking expression of that syntax of unfreedom which is the groundwork of all his prose.

In a sense, the problem of Kafka’s entire work is to know to what extent it should be read in the indicative, and to what extent in the subjunctive. ‘If the world were to signify this,’ he seems to reflect, ‘then this would be the right course to follow, and it would have these consequences; if, on the other hand, the world were to signify such and such other things, then I would have such and such a course to follow, and that again would have other consequences.’ What the consequences will be is always deadly certain; but whether or not they rest on a valid hypothesis Kafka is never sure. The result is that he often allows two or more possibilities to stand side by side without being able to say himself which he really means. All that finally remains as real is his own uncertainty, which he now denounces in himself on moral grounds as lack of resolution, now again humbly respects on religious grounds as a consciousness of not being worthy of the truth. Where many different positions have been adopted about a single scene (as when K. is finally condemned in the cathedral in *The Trial*) the resultant impression is of a many-sided and inscrutable truth at the core. And although Kafka would probably have been happier had he at times been able to forego his profound thoughts, he has nevertheless again and again created the double virtue of depth out of the dire necessity of ambiguity.

We read in *The Castle* that ‘every step’ is recorded in the official dossiers but that the entries are never read, and that the fact that they are never read has a deep significance; and yet this frightening description of red tape is not merely ironical. Nor is it only another way of saying that though the conscience registers everything the divine authorities remain indifferent—i.e. that morality is without effect. The sentence in question may well have these implications, but it is primarily a symptom of Kafka’s readiness to believe in paradoxes, of his desire to see the distorted negative of the world transformed into a religious positive. It is again a symptom of his readiness to recognize in the merciless greatness and inscrutability of power some evidence of meaning, even as Job finally recognized God’s justice because He had created such gigantic creatures as the hippopotamus and the crocodile. Perhaps Kafka himself could not have said what he really means when he abandons the indicative for the subjunctive mood. But must not this mean for us, at least, that his work, despite its richness of insight, will remain philosophically and morally suspect? Is it not almost in itself suspicious that he, whose concerns and cast of mind certainly do not suggest that he was primarily a novelist in any conventional sense, should have chosen to describe reality and express his philosophical ideas through the medium of fiction? Even where he is telling a fable, like the magnificent *Before the Law*, he still leaves us with a number of possible interpretations and no means of knowing which is the correct one.