

A NOTE ON FRANZ KAFKA

by Edwin Muir

IN AUSTRIA, the country which has remained to our day the most faithful to tradition, there have been two recent writers of religious genius. Rainer Maria Rilke is a poet who by the subtlety of his feeling and the daring intimacy of his thought is more closely related to the English religious poets of the seventeenth century than to any we have had since. He has the same practical temper, and the same conviction that the relation of man to God is not only a mystery, but also a problem. The second Austrian writer, the subject of this essay, had the same temper and the same conviction; but the symbolism he employed was very different; it was not Christian, like Rilke's, nor, though he was a Jew himself, was it Jewish. Franz Kafka was influenced both by Hebrew and Christian thought: by the *Cabbala* no less than by Pascal and the Dane Kierkegaard. The problems which chiefly occupied him belonged equally to Christian and Jewish religion: the problems of divine justice and divine grace. But the symbolical forms which he created for those problems were individual, and indeed almost idiosyncratic. This makes him at a first attempt difficult to understand; but once the preliminary difficulty is overcome, it gives all that he says a more intense interest, the interest of seeing a mind starting from an independent point with nothing but the desire for religious truth, and as if by an inevitable process arriving at the traditional and even the or-

thodox. By this I do not mean that before he began to write his stories Kafka had not studied religion and theology, both orthodox and unorthodox; he was on the contrary well read in them. But when he sets his two great religious allegories moving, it is as if he were allowing all theological and religious thought to remain for the time in a state of suspension, taking them neither to be true nor untrue; and it is purely through the building up of the allegory that he comes back to them or, more exactly, discovers them again.

Before attempting to distinguish the qualities of Kafka's work, it will be best to give some short account of his life. Born in Prague in 1883, he studied law at the university there and after receiving his doctorate took up a post in an insurance office. After a disastrous love affair he fell ill, symptoms of consumption appeared, and for some time he lived mainly in sanatoria, where he partially regained his health. When the war ended he set up house in Berlin; but the years of inflation came, food was scarce and bad, and his disease laid hold on him again. In 1924 he went to a sanatorium near Vienna, where shortly afterwards he died in his forty-first year.

Mainly at the instance of his friends he had published during his lifetime six small volumes of short stories and fables, all of them curious in content and consummate in form. Before his death he destroyed a great pile of manuscript; but his lifelong friend Herr Max Brod, the distinguished novelist,

was able to rescue three long, unfinished stories, *The Castle*, *The Trial*, and *America*. Their possession, however, put him in a difficult position; for Kafka had left explicit instructions that, along with all his other papers, they should be destroyed. Herr Brod, for reasons too serious to be treated briefly, but entirely to his honor, refused to obey his friend's instructions, and the three books have since appeared.

As it casts a great deal of light on his character I shall quote from the letter which Kafka left to be read after his death. "Dear Max," he wrote, "my last request is that all that I leave behind me (in bookcases and chests, in my rooms, in the office, or wherever any of it may have got to)—everything of mine in note-books, manuscripts, letters, whether my own or from other people; everything written or sketched which you may have in your possession or can get hold of in my name—shall be burned to the last page unread. Letters which other people refuse to hand over to you they can promise at least to burn themselves." It was as if he were terrified lest any of his errors should survive him, and this is of a piece with his character; for the task he deliberately set himself was to discover the right way of life, and his deepest conviction was that, no matter how scrupulous one may be—and by ordinary standards he himself was fantastically scrupulous—error is unavoidable and, once committed, fatal. It was probably this feeling that made the publication even of a short story or an essay during his lifetime a matter for long and difficult reflection. Yet he did not consider his writings important except for himself. His whole character, indeed, was unusual, yet simple in main outline; for what distinguished it was a uniform intensity which would be content with nothing less than exactitude in conduct and thought, and which to a first glance has an appearance of pedantry.

Those qualities are also characteristic of Kafka's three long stories. These form, as

Herr Willy Haas has pointed out, a trilogy corresponding with grotesque differences to the *Divine Comedy*. *The Trial*, which is his "Inferno", deals with a victim of divine justice who does not know even the offence for which he is summoned, and whose judge remains to the end concealed behind an army of subordinate prosecutors and advocates with very questionable credentials. *America*, his "Purgatorio", deals less directly with supernatural powers, and relates the adventures of a German boy who goes to the United States, is exploited by rogues, and falls from one misfortune into another. He is Kafka's most charming character, and somewhat resembles Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*. He is more credible, however, and there is in his presentation, as Herr Brod has pointed out, a touch of Chaplinesque humor. If it were possible to conceive of a perfectly natural boy performing the office of a Myshkin with something of the air of one of Charlie Chaplin's heroes, one would have some idea of this delicious figure. The third story, *The Castle*,* is Kafka's curious version of the "Paradiso", a Paradiso which is never reached. The hero of this story arrives one night at a village belonging to a Count West-West who lives in a castle above it. Just after his welcome at the inn he is asked for his papers, and on the spur of the moment he replies that he has been engaged as a land-surveyor by the castle authorities. The castle is rung up, and to his astonishment he is informed that he has actually been engaged as a land-surveyor. But it is not clear whether the castle authorities are playing with him or not, and the rest of the book is the story of his efforts to be officially owned by the castle as a land-surveyor and to win for himself an acknowledged position in the village. He does not succeed, but at the end when, worn out by the struggle, he lies on his death-bed, word comes down from the castle that though he has no legal claim to live in the village, yet taking certain auxil-

* Published in this country by Knopf.

iary considerations into account he is to be permitted to live there and work there.

For this elaborate allegory there are symbols enough to be found. To Herr Brod, for instance, the castle represents divine grace, so mysteriously granted to some, so mysteriously withheld in spite of their intensest efforts from others; while the village is the community, in which one can find one's true place only by deciphering and following the guidance of God. This, indeed, seems to be the meaning of the fable; yet an allegory has not justified itself if it contains nothing more than its interpretation; and the logic of Kafka's narrative is so close that it builds up a whole particularized system of spiritual relations with such an autonomous life of its own that it illumines the symbol rather than is illumined by it. It is almost certain, moreover, that Kafka put together this world without having his eye very much on the symbol; his allegory is not a mere re-creation of conceptions already settled; and the entities he describes seem therefore newly discovered, and as if they had never existed before. They are like additions to the intellectual world.

America stands somewhat apart from the other two books. The action takes place in time, and the characters have, like Dostoevski's, a mixture of the natural and the preternatural which makes their outlines periodically dissolve and combine again in a continuously more mythical pattern. There are scenes in *America* as good, I think, as some of Dostoevski's, and in this respect better: that they are corrected, even at their wildest, by a fantastic sense of comedy. The fault of the book is that its setting shifts uneasily between the metaphysical and the actual, and that while its scene is a fantastic version of the United States, it occasionally crosses to a province which is not of the actual world at all. It is the most uneven of his works.

In the other two stories, however, the action takes place entirely in this other province, and everything, the characters, the setting,

the development, is part of a metaphysical or theological construction. These intellectually fashioned worlds have their own laws and their own geography. Time, space, custom, right and wrong, have undergone a subtle but decisive change; trifles are crucial; subtle questions are more important than general ones; and every motion is judged by a different standard from that of the world. Yet it is difficult to define what principle it is which causes all those modifications, or to establish the laws or the geography of those two worlds; for their validity resides purely in their imaginative justice, and measure in their symmetry. Except for this we have only one clue to lead us through them: Kierkegaard's theory, which influenced Kafka very deeply, of the incommensurability of the divine and the human moral law. With this clue we are led through maze after maze in which everything is changed and yet real; in which every thought is judged by an intuition of the divine law and in which we recognize objects without being able to give them a name; and simply by doing this find that we have acquired a new understanding of the most ordinary and even the most trivial diurnal things. The architecture of those worlds is consummate, and every feature is interesting; for Kafka was a master of construction and of fascinating detail. In realistic novels excessive detail is a defect, for it catalogues things which we could better have imagined; but the author of a purely imaginative world is in the same position as a traveller who has returned from an unknown country, and who interests us more by the faithfulness with which he can describe a native broomstick than by anything else. So Kafka's detail is always fascinating, but it is full of meaning as well; for it is the last working-out of a conception which to be perfect had to inform all its parts.

But more remarkable is the reality with which he has endowed his symbolical characters, for in very few other prose allegories except those of Bunyan have the characters

while incarnating abstract qualities existed with a life of their own. Kafka's characters are as convincing as Bunyan's, but they live in a world which is far beyond Bunyan's range. The difference between those two worlds can be best indicated by giving the names of the characters who live in them. Bunyan called his figures by such names as Christian, Faithful, Great Heart, Giant Despair, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman, which are the labels of psychological types. Kafka's characters, on the other hand, have titles which indicate their functions; such titles as the Assistants, the Messengers, the Village Secretary, the Village Superintendent, and the Advocates. The reason for this difference is simple enough. Bunyan's sole concern in *The Pilgrim's Progress* was to conduct his hero successfully through all the difficulties which lay between him and his salvation; the road was known, the dangers upon it were expected and prepared for; and so the characters fell naturally into two classes: those who would aid the hero in his journey, and those who would retard him, whether by violence or by false intelligence. But Kafka's hero is concerned mainly with comprehending the order of the spiritual universe, for only by doing this can he hope to find his way, and achieve his salvation; and so the functions of his characters are of far more importance to him than their dispositions. His road, however, is filled with almost insuperable difficulties; for people's reports, ancient legends, one's own intuitions, even the road-signs, may all be equally untrustworthy. Christian began by knowing what all the necessary moves were; but the hero of *The Castle* has to discover them for himself, and has little assurance even when he has found them that they are the right ones. His first attempt early in the story to reach the castle is symbolical of all his later ones. "The way proved long. For the street he was in, the main street of the village, did not lead up to the castle hill, it only made towards it and then, as if deliberately,

turned aside, and though it did not lead away from the castle, it got no nearer to it either." And perpetually, in spite of his cunning, the hero is led into sidetracks; perpetually some little involuntary error involves him in discomfort or even in catastrophe; while at other times pure chance seems to set him for a while on the right way. Yet though he strays farther and farther from his path, meanwhile the spiritual order in which he cannot find a place assumes vaster and clearer outline, and a world is created out of his successive failures to secure an entrance to it. Compared with K.'s journey through the infinite complications of the spiritual order, Christian's progress is like a pleasantly eventful walk from one English village to another. Yet the mystery is never accepted as absolute mystery; it is also a problem, certain terms of which are capable of solution, certain provinces of which can be surveyed. Though rejected by the castle authorities, the hero does remain in his own way a "land-surveyor".

In those two allegories, indeed, there is hardly a religious question which is not penetratingly touched. Take for example the passage in *The Castle* where Olga talks to K. about Klammm, who symbolizes one aspect of the Godhead. "We do not often speak about Klammm," she says, "whom I've never seen. You know Frieda doesn't like me and has never let me look at him; still his appearance is well known in the village, some people have seen him, everybody has heard of him, and out of glimpses and rumors and through various distorting factors an image of Klammm has been constructed which is certainly true in essentials. But only in essentials. In detail it fluctuates, and yet perhaps not so much as Klammm's real appearance. For he's reported as having one appearance when he comes into the village and another on leaving it . . . when he's alone he's different from when he's talking to people, and—what is comprehensible after all—he's almost another person up in the

castle. And even in the village there are considerable differences in the accounts given of him. . . . Now of course all those differences aren't the result of magic, but can be easily explained; they depend on the mood of the observer, on the degree of his excitement, on the countless graduations of hope or despair which are possible to him when he sees Klamm, and besides, he can usually see Klamm only for a second or two." "An image of Klamm has been constructed which is certainly true in essentials. But only in essentials." We are very far here from Bunyan.

Or take the passage in *The Trial* where Josef K., the hero, visits a man who has promised by influence to obtain a pardon for him. Josef K. discovers that there are three kinds of pardon: ostensible pardon, postponement of the case, and real pardon. The first sets one absolutely free for the moment, but at any time one may be arrested again, and the whole case restarted from the beginning. Consequently if one accepts this kind of pardon one is doomed to live in perpetual apprehension. The postponement of the case has the advantage of keeping it permanently in its preliminary stages; but then one must exert oneself to the utmost, engage advocates, give bribes, and throw up any other work one is engaged on. Real pardon, on the contrary, can be obtained by no advocacy or corruption, but solely by the fact of one's innocence. Josef K.'s acquaintance, who has attended the law courts all his life, has had no experience of such cases, but he is convinced that in the past there must have been instances of them, though this is difficult to establish. The whole passage might be superficially taken as a satire on such things as pardons and indulgences; but Kafka's intention is never merely satirical; and he goes on to prove that without those two conditional kinds of pardon the hero's plight actually would be far worse. The description of the advocates for the accused in the same book is equally

characteristic. These men are admitted only into an anteroom of the courts of justice and are not even present at the trial; nothing is done for their convenience; there is a large hole in the middle of the floor which has never been repaired, and in which they are always spraining their ankles; they are allowed a very limited competence, and only in the preliminary stages of any case; and almost their sole expedient is bribery, which never has any real effect. This in turn might easily be taken for a satire on the priesthood. Yet without those advocates, Kafka adds, the hero would be in a worse position; for they have some tangential relation, difficult to establish, but by very roundabout ways operative, to the spiritual entities. From these few indications it will be seen that in *The Trial* the helplessness of man before divine justice is described with terrific force. Yet on the other hand every ameliorating circumstance is taken into account, sometimes with a flash of grotesque humor, sometimes in a train of grave and circumstantial reasoning whose purpose is to show that here both despair and hope are inadequate responses. Kafka's temper in treating those most difficult problems remains throughout that of a good, thorough and unassuming workman; and he deals with the material to his hand and measures and puts together his metaphysical worlds with the same painstaking honesty as a mason might build a house intended equally to be worked in and to be lived in.

The main ideas which run through Kafka's work may be condensed into four axioms. The first two are, that compared with the divine law, no matter how unjust it may sometimes appear to us, all human effort, even the highest, is in the wrong; and that always, whatever our minds or our feelings may tell us, the claim of the divine law to unconditional reverence and obedience is absolute. The other two are complementary: that there is a right way of life, and that its discovery depends on one's at-

itude to powers which are almost unknown. In his two allegories Kafka sets out to discover something about those powers, to prove where he can that they are necessarily right, and to read from his intuition of their nature and aims the only true way of life for his hero. To most modern eyes this must seem from the start a hopeless, indeed a foolish, attempt. The interesting point is that when one surveys it it strikes one as neither Quixotic, nor as lacking in valuable results. It is not only a possible attempt; in Kafka's case it has obviously been a richly fruitful one.

By many of his German admirers Kafka has been called a mystical writer. The adjective seems singularly ill-chosen, however, for the one thing which his heroes never succeed in achieving is a moment of mystical illumination in which their problems might find alleviation. Like Pascal, whom he resembled in many ways—in the daring and solidity of his thought, and in his purgatorial temper—he was a religious genius who, though his faith was unshakable, found little rest in faith; and whose deepest intellectual agonies were caused by the problem of religion itself. He had a singular knowledge of the intricacies of spiritual experience; yet he seems to know them only as possibilities; he remains outside them, as if cut off by an invisible barrier; and his heroes stand in much the same relation to the worlds they traverse as Dante to the worlds in his poem. Sometimes, indeed, his voice has the note of a Calvinist who sees and acknowledges his own reprobation, who accepts the scheme, but is not himself accepted. At those moments his hero seems to be wandering in a vast logical nightmare; the realization comes to him that he has lost his way, the story becomes like a protracted anxiety-neurosis, and one feels the tension has to snap. Then he always starts anew from something ordinary and concrete, from a sober formulation of the hero's ostensible position, for instance: "It may not be much, but I have

a home, a position and real work to do, I have a promised wife who takes her share of my professional duties when I have other business. I'm going to marry her and become a member of the community". Coming where they do in the story, those summaries have always an overwhelming pathos; and in general, indeed, Kafka's pathetic effects are secured simply by defining the hero's situation, or by noting that there is a moderate hope for him. The pathos of moderate hopes, which in spite of their moderation are yet worthy of being clung to, even with desperation; this is a province which Kafka has made his own. Those hopes—and this adds to their pathos—are invariably founded on experience. "Once answer a false ring at your night-bell," the country doctor says in one of the short stories, "and you can never repair the damage." Or again—a passage which Kafka afterwards deleted: "If you have the strength to look at things steadily, without, as it were, blinking your eyes, you can see much; but if you relax only once and shut our eyes, everything fades immediately into obscurity". Or, from *America*: "It is impossible to justify yourself if there is no good-will". These axioms do not sound, it is true, like the utterances of hope; yet in their context they do, for there every practical rule, however limited in application, is a help. Their pathos consists in their inadequacy to the vast journey which still lies before the hero, and in the fact that they are founded on experience which must needs be invalid for the problems which will confront him there. Yet they have some kind of use; their existence helps him, even if when he comes to apply them at some future time they will be found mysteriously lacking.

It is a practical temper, a temper which scrutinizes every hope, and yields to no access of despair, which informs all Kafka's work, informs every manifestation of it. It determined the form into which he threw his two great religious narratives: the form of the allegory. For this was the only one

which by its very structure was bound to carry him forward to the end he set in front of him. In the ordinary religious novel all that can be presented is a description of religious feeling, or a succession of conversations on religion. At best, however, these can only be conditional; we may have subtle religious problems discussed from different sides as in Dostoevski, or complete religious theories outlined as in Tolstoy; but these by their very nature belong to the world of opinion, and not to that of demonstration. All true characters in a novel have necessarily a variety of desires; they may have aspirations for religious truth, but they will have other passions as well; and to the novelist, and rightly, the religious facet will be only one of several, and will concern him only in so far as it is necessary to the completion of his character. Accordingly the novel is a form in which it is possible to describe a religious genius; but it is not a form in which anything can be said about religion. This, however, is what Kafka wished to do. He postulated therefore a hero whose only passion was to discover religious truth; and once that was done the hero's passion was no longer relative, like that for example of the characters in Dostoevski's novels, but absolute, and

capable of being logically worked out. The action, in his allegorical narratives is a sort of dialectic; one position has to be established before we advance to the next, and every advance takes us in the direction we wish to go. So, I think, for anyone who wants to have a serious imaginative treatment of religion, Kafka is infinitely more satisfying than Dostoevski.

There remains his superb literary art. In the difficult *genre* which he essayed he left nothing partly fashioned, no obstacle which he did not merely overcome, but overcome with apparent ease. Temper, method, style: all are consummate. His diction is of the utmost flexibility and exactitude, and of an inevitable propriety. His conduct of the sentence is masterly. Flowing without being monotonous, his long sentences achieve an endless variety of inflection by two things alone: an exact skill in the disposition of the clauses, and of the words making them up. I can think of hardly any other writer who can secure so much force as Kafka by the placing of a word. Yet in all his works he probably never placed a word unnaturally or even conspicuously. He had, it seems to me, all the intellectual and imaginative as well as the technical endowment of a great writer.

PRELUDE

by Conrad Aiken

Thus systole addressed diastole,
The heart contracting, with its grief of burden,
To the lax heart, with grief of burden gone.

Thus star to dead leaf speaks; thus cliff to sea;
And thus the spider, on a summer's day,
To the bright thistledown, trapped in the web.

No language leaps this chasm like a lightning:
Here is no message of assuagement, blown
From Ecuador to Greenland; here is only

A trumpet blast, that calls dead men to arms;
The granite's pity for the cloud; the whisper
Of time to space.