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THE FUNCTION OF STYLE IN FRANZ KAFKA'S *THE TRIAL*

BY KEITH FORT

KAFKA has been dead almost forty years, and during that time *The Trial* has been examined and re-examined in such detail that today there is at least a degree of agreement on the essential points of the novel's meaning. However, there is almost total disagreement about what the "Court" is and why it has the nightmarish quality of unreality that has made Kafka's name synonymous with any unreal, mysterious force which operates against man. We find ourselves faced, in studying *The Trial*, with a situation like seeing the roof of a house without being able to see the walls.

The meaning of the novel comes from a study of the character of Joseph K., his shifting attitudes and hopes, and eventually his death. But the *reality* of the world that K. is in is not understood. Murray Krieger is one critic who notes the importance of discovering the relation between the bank world that K. lives in and the court world; but Krieger admits that he does not himself understand what this relation is.¹ Most critics who deal with Kafka take an implicit stand on this question and can be separated into two groups. The first group hold that the court has subjective reality; i.e., the court is a psychological allegory as in a dream. They say that Joseph K. has the need for self-expression, and his subconscious creates objects that are analogous to his need. These objects, the court and its creatures, are projections of K.'s imagination. In studying the novel these critics use a method not unlike dream analysis, where X in the dream is equal to Y in K.'s mind. The second group maintain an exactly opposite viewpoint. They say that the court is real within the

¹Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation*, New York (Holt, Rinehart and Winston), 1960, p. 138, n. 2.

novel. It has its offices in attics of suburban tenements of a large city and has its officers and agents. This court actually accuses K. and eventually executes him. This group of critics naturally believe that the court is totally independent of K.'s mind, and its form is consequently unrelated to any state of K.'s mind.

Certain theoretical questions are by implication raised in an approach to the question of the reality of the court. When any object is described in a work of art, its reality is instantly defined. We are accustomed to accepting pragmatic reality as the essential quality of objects. If an author uses the word "chair," it is assumed that the reality of the object he is describing is "an object for men to sit in." But this is only one way of defining the chair. I have read of a schizophrenic who would not sit in a chair because he believed that the chair would attempt to squeeze him to death. For the normal man and for the schizophrenic, the reality of the chair is quite different; if each tried to describe the chair, he would use a different style to express this reality. We would probably understand what the normal man means because the essence he is trying to express is one that we accept. The schizophrenic would, on the other hand, have a hard time making us understand that the essence of the chair for him was something else. In the end he would have to resort to the use of private symbolism, meaningful only to himself.

For both, the ultimate cause for the reality which they recognize would be a value system which they hold. The normal man, in expressing the pragmatic essence of the chair, is reflecting his belief that "use" is the prime value of the chair. The schizophrenic would be trying to show the essence of the chair in relation to some values, personal and esoteric, which are important to him.

Dante, for example, in *The Divine Comedy* describes things (characters and objects) in such a way as to show the relation of the object he is describing to God. The essence of the

thing is determined by its relation to God. I wish to be careful here to avoid overstatement. I do not mean that objects cannot have pragmatic reality in *The Divine Comedy*, for, of course, they do. But when Dante is describing objects that have a pragmatic essence, he has no real need for the devices of literature, for he can simply state the word that represents the object, and its essence is assumed to be pragmatic. However, when he is trying to show what things *really* are, he needs to have a style which can describe them so as to bring out their real essence—their relation to God. The object, represented by words, is compressed by literary devices until it reveals this reality. Structure, symbols, and all aspects of Dante's literary technique are tools which force a thing to reveal its religious reality. The unity of style, form, structure in a given age grows up because the values held can best be realized by particular kinds of literary devices and techniques.

It is traditionally, therefore, *meaning* which determines *reality*. Style is the basic tool for causing a meaning to be shown as the essence of reality. Yet the modern way of looking at the world may be said to have begun at the moment when the general acceptance of value and meaning began to crumble. With the gradual death of values, the nature of reality crumbled also. We were left with varied systems of thought (religion, art, science, etc.) with varied values. With the different values came differing realities, which in turn meant that words which once referred to the same reality now had to refer to different realities. The breakdown in communication in our time comes largely from the fact that the same old words are used very differently. The only common denominator that allows general communication is pragmatic reality, which is less a reflection of value than it is a reflection of our failure to have value.

With the passing of a generally accepted value system a new artistic process came into being. The artist was presented with dead appearances and dead words, and he had to go through

appearances to a perception of Being which would, he hoped, reveal meaning to him. Meaning no longer determines reality, but rather reality determines meaning. With an understanding of this reversal, we see how style is catapulted into an importance in modern literature that it never before had. Style has passed from being a tool for the expression and realization of meaning into a tool for the discovery of meaning. Today, instead of showing how value is present in the world, style—the way in which objects are described—will determine value.

Ultimately a belief underlies much of serious modern literature that there is a correspondence between words and the essence of objects and that the act of understanding is conducted through words, so that, as style is purified, the essence of objects is revealed. Correspondingly, as the essence of objects is revealed, the style is necessarily purified. This “complementation” might then be carried to a point where the words become Word and objects become Being. However, language always seems to break down almost before this mystical process can be begun.

Henry James's time-worn cliché that writers must render and not report is an implicit understanding that every time a modern author puts pen to paper he must redefine his reality. The styleless writer is one who accepts pragmatic reality without thought; i.e., author and reader agree that the reality of objects is their usefulness. However, more serious writers usually offer a “new” reality which is defined with their work. Physical details in a story or novel have as their essential reality their relation to the theme of that particular work. But we would not go so far as to suggest, because a character in a story has his hair parted in the middle and the story is about the need for balance in human affairs, that the essence of parted hair is balanced personality.

The giants of our time have not been content to let their style create an immanent reality which is valid only within one story. They are seekers after the absolute. They hope not only to redefine reality within the limits of a particular work, but also

to define reality in life itself by using fiction as a means to pass beyond appearance into a perception of Being itself, which will be true not only within the story but without as well. Hemingway, for example, describes a world where reality is stripped of its pragmatic qualities so that objects exist in themselves without meaningful relations for man. His style accomplishes one of the most difficult and frequently faced tasks of modern fiction—the depiction of non-significant objects. When we consider how deeply ingrained in our minds is the concept of reality as pragmatic, we can have some idea of the enormity of the problem faced. Once this nature of reality has been shown in Hemingway's works, the despairing conclusions at which they arrive follow necessarily. His definition of reality determines a major part of the meaning of his novels.

The origins of the great experiments in style in the past three-quarters of a century have been highly personal, intense searches for paths which might lead through appearances towards Being. These experiments have lit arcs of great beauty across the literary sky, but the attempts to force objects to reveal Being and words to reveal the Word have failed—in the blank pages of Mallarmé, the confusion of *Finnegans Wake*, the silence of Rimbaud, the reasonable obscurity of Pound, the jumbled dreams of surrealism. These have all become *ex post facto* erections of dead-end signs on a few of the infinite number of roads that lead outwards from cliché towards ultimate meaning.

One more important contention in my theory of style must be presented before returning to *The Trial*. Style is intention. An artist looks at the world in a certain way so that he notes certain details in the objects he sees. Thus Dante looked through the world towards God and found it to be good or evil depending upon the nature of its relation to the value he held. Reality which is defined by style must be seen as the result of looking at the world in a certain way, towards a value.

Now we can return to an examination of *The Trial*. Joseph

K. seems to live in two worlds. On the one hand is his bank world and on the other the world centered around the court. The bank world is apparently "real." Its reality is a pragmatic reality which we simply accept as real because it imitates what is our accustomed way of looking at the world. When Joseph K. is in his bank world he sees objects as useful, related to the future, etc. What then is the court?

The court is composed of the same objects that make up the world in which K. lives. It is the same world which we recognize so easily when its reality is defined within the bounds of the pragmatism to which we are accustomed. But it becomes the court when it is looked at in a new way and its reality is redefined. This redefinition occurs when K. reflects upon his daily life and sees that its essence is not the harmless, even benign, reality which he assumed it to be. He sees instead that the essence of the world is the court. This new reality is defined by another level of K.'s being, other than the conscious, rational, future-regarding intellect which he uses with the bank. It is very close to being his subconscious, but "subconscious" has connotations which are not exactly applicable. For example, in "The Whipper" chapter K. passes quickly and often between these two ways of looking at the world. On the one hand, the reality of the action is probably a simple reprimand to two clerks, a reprimand that would insure the smooth functioning of the bank. On the other, the essence of the action is a cruel, inhuman representation of the evil at the heart of K.'s bank world. It is, therefore, not exactly accurate to say that K.'s world is a court when he sees with the eye of the subconscious and a bank when he sees with the eyes of the conscious. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the world as a bank is seen by K. the functionary, and the world as a court is seen by K. the human being.

We might imagine that the redefinition of reality by K.'s innermost being would result in symbols unintelligible for us. This is not true; however, *The Trial* offers proof of the fact that there

is a degree to which all modern men share in the subconscious or existentialist idiom which allows Kafka's personal interpretation of his world to be at least partially intelligible.

There is now one more important step in understanding why the court takes the peculiar form it does. Style defines reality in relation to value, but Kafka is writing from within the total anxiety caused by the absence of absolute value. He redefines his world with his subconscious, looking through appearances, measuring them against his need for an absolute. K. redefines objects in relation to the presence or absence of absolute meaning. When absolute meaning is not found, incoherence and chaos emerge as the ultimate reality of Joseph K.'s world. So Kafka in *The Trial* creates a world which is relatively significant (to K.) but absolutely insignificant. This is, of course, a vision similar to the one created by a great deal of so-called "absurdist" art in our time. The reality which Kafka creates by his style is the reality of chaos.

Although the level of K.'s being involved with the court is broader than the "subconscious," it has more affinities with the subconscious than with the conscious. This distinction is important in *The Trial* in explaining a great deal of the action. K.'s mind defines his life in terms of the court, but he does not himself necessarily understand the meaning of that definition. When Joseph K. goes to the court or has any dealings with it, he is bringing his conscious mind to bear upon an insight that has been intuited by his subconscious. Although this device sounds like dream analysis, it has one great difference from that method. In a dream there is no real subject matter upon which the subconscious operates. It simply discovers or creates symbols that reflect itself. This is not so with Joseph K. He actually analyzes his life with the subconscious, so that the subject matter on which he works is composed of the real actions and objects of his life.

I refer again to my analogy with the chair to clarify this point. If a normal man defines a chair for me as "something to sit in,"

he will be using his rational mind. If I analyze the style of his definition, I will understand something about the way this man's mind works. If the psychotic, on the other hand, defines the chair as a thing which will kill him, he is defining the chair with his subconscious. If I am lucky, I may also learn something about the way his mind works from analyzing his statements. Suppose, however, that the psychotic suddenly recovers and remembers how he defined the chair and wants to understand himself as well as the chair. He will then present himself to the image he had of the chair as a potential murderer, and in understanding that picture will understand something of himself and of the chair. Thus, when Joseph K. goes to the court he is trying to rationalize and understand a subconsciously intuited truth about the real world around him.

The Trial can be thought of as a huge extended metaphor in which Kafka states, "K.'s world is a court." Both parts of this metaphor (bank world and court world) are expanded and extended so that we have a fairly complete picture of both kinds of reality. One of the most basic kinds of metaphors presents a particular object in relation to an idea so that the object and the idea complement each other, as in Marvel's famous "vegetable love." It would have been possible for Marvel to take the connotations of "vegetable" and the connotations of "love" and extend and expand them until each half of the metaphor became an entire world, as Kafka has done in *The Trial*. The idea of the meaning of the world is expanded until it takes on the form of another real world. Gunther Anders calls this technique the use of "a literal metaphor." He recognizes that Kafka's method is to translate meaning into picture: "The objects in his world [court] are frozen truths, objects created out of truth about objects in our world."²

Upon the morning when K. is arrested, he is awakened from his sleep by two warders, who are later joined by an inspector.

²Gunther Anders, *Franz Kafka*, trans. by A. Steer and A. K. Thorlby, London, (Bowes and Bowes), 1960, p. 57.

K. soon realizes that there are also three clerks from his bank in the house, who have come to take him to work. Later, on the way to the bank with the clerks, he notices:

the inspector had usurped his attention so that he did not recognize the three clerks, and the clerks had in turn made him oblivious of the inspector.

He cannot see them at the same time, for they are the same figures looked at in a different way. I do not mean to imply that there is a point-by-point equation between K.'s bank world and his court world, i.e., that an object in one world will receive a new definition in the next chapter or on the next page. If K. were to recall his entire life on both planes, then such an equation should be possible; but the novel is fragmentary, and we find many instances where one side of this metaphorical equation is developed and the other side is not.

The court to which Joseph K. goes is simply and directly described as though the world were actually as it seems to be in the novel, and it is Kafka's contention that the world really is that way. The simplicity of the description is a further tribute to the fact that Kafka was totally immersed in his new reality as he was writing. We might imagine ourselves in Joseph K.'s position. Suppose that we were suddenly wakened from sleep to go to work. It is likely that the deeper levels of our being would start to feel that the call to work was the call from some hostile, meaningless force which was making us perform a futile act. Almost immediately, however, we would repress this vision and reconsider the call with our usual, practical way of looking at the world. We would recognize that we had to go to work to make a living, etc. But Kafka does not repress his existential way of looking at the world. He continues with this deeper vision until he has seen that the reality he lives in is not the harmless, reasonable, practical thing that habit has accustomed him to but is instead the frightening, meaningless, hostile reality of the court.