TIME AND REALITY
IN KAFKA'S THE TRIAL
AND THE CASTLE

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Kafka once wrote in an aphorism that one of his most important wishes was “to attain a view of life in which life, while still retaining its natural full-bodied rise and fall, would simultaneously be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, a dream, a dim hovering.” This remark describes with some accuracy the style and mood of his two central works The Trial and The Castle and shows that it was Kafka's aim to employ in his fiction the idea that time and space are illusory.

The dreamlike quality of time values and the assumption of an interior time recognized alone by the officials and K. appear throughout The Trial. In a passage deleted from the first chapter, Kafka had written that the riskiest moment of the day is the moment when one awakes. “Man ist doch im Schlaf und im Traum wenigstens scheinbar in einem von Wachen wesentlich verschiedenen Zustand gewesen.” Because K. this morning has found his world different from the way it was the evening before, we understand that part of the dream world has intruded into his everyday world. The opening of “The Metamorphosis” may be compared with that of The Trial where Kafka writes that it takes great vigilance to see things in the same place that they were in the evening before.

On his first Sunday in court, K. hurries to arrive at nine o'clock “although he had not even been required to appear at any specified time.” Despite the fact that he is late he walks more slowly as he approaches the house of the examiners, as if now he had abundant time. If anything, Kafka is more adept at creating the dream than the “full-bodied rise and fall” of life. When K. leaves the examining room, the magistrate mysteriously gets to the door before him as in a dream people appear at the beck and call of our fears and wishes.

In the unfinished chapter “Das Haus” we find the curious juxtaposition of dream upon dream. As K. lies down on the couch in his office, his thoughts hover between dream and reality, only here reality is that of K.'s waking life which is often like a dream to the reader. Thus Kafka makes us aware of various levels of reality—the dream within the dream. K.'s first dream represents his alienated situation as he views Frau Grubach's boarders, many unknown to him, for he had for some time not bothered himself about concerns of the house. Then as he turns from the group and hurries into the law
courts, corridors and rooms become familiar “als wären sie seine Wohn-ung seit jeher.” As K. becomes more deeply implicated in the court, the details of living lose for him their significance, the dream becomes more like the inner dream.

In connection with the dream it should be noted that K. is often “in the dark.” Heavy curtains hang over the windows in the advocate’s bedroom; in the cathedral K. by mistake extinguishes his lamp and “Er blieb stehen, es war ganz dunkel, er wusste gar nicht, an welcher Stille der Kirche er sich befand.” In this dream world one loses one’s bearings; and since K. is lost inwardly, his physical relation to objects and places is an uncertain one, too.

When the student enters the examining room where K. stands alone with the woman who occupies the apartment outside, K. experiences his first meeting with a representative of the official group on human terms as a rival. This meeting implies the recognition that the trial is on a different level from “the full-bodied rise and fall.” Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the meeting takes place in the same examining room where K. had had his first hearing. Kafka thus creates a link between the two worlds (inner and outer), a link which gives artistic unity to the passage.

A scene in the lumber room in the bank leads to further insights into the time experience in The Trial. When K. returns to the lumber room on the second evening, he finds everything exactly as he had left it the night before. The whiper is still standing in the same position in front of the warders. As K. opens the door, the warders at once cry out. “Sir!” Time has not moved on this level of experience although K. has lived through a whole day of clock time. K. deals with this situation in the realm of action by asking the clerks to clear out the lumber room the next day although unconsciously he recognizes that his experience is an inner one, for he would not ask them to do this if he thought that the whiper and the warders were there for the clerks to see. It is K.’s fault that the warders are being whipped, thus the scene represents hidden guilt. He asks the clerk to clear it out knowing that he cannot remove the imprint of the scene from his mind other than by the destruction of its outward symbols. Time has stood still in this back room of K.'s consciousness, a trick made possible by Kafka’s concept of the idea of time as reality.

The appearance of K.’s uncle and the mention of his daughter, Erna, is one of the few insights we have into K.’s past. K.’s uncle understands, without being told, the facts of K.’s case. K. is aware that he has known all along that his uncle would turn up, for the uncle, like the rest of the characters in the book, has reality only in relation to K.'s inner life. As a molder of K.’s past, the uncle, too, like the family of Amalia in The Castle, is implicated. The uncle is part of the everlasting present of K.’s mind time, neither past nor present having reality except as they are viewed by K. The Platonistic character of Kafka’s idea of time is clear when we observe that K. (as the initial suggests) is a symbol, not an individual, so we are dealing here not with a specific relationship of past and present but with a general one.

In the uncompleted chapter “Fahrt zu Mutter” we find the
same general relation between past and present. K.'s mother is almost blind, so unlike the uncle, she is ignorant of K.'s plight. Her refusal to be implicated in K.'s problem is further shown by her present indifference to K.'s visit, for earlier she had been anxious to see him. The mother, like the uncle, is part of K.'s mind, but the blind part, that which is suppressed: "die Mutter hielt ihn sogar trotz aller Widerrede für den Direktor der Bank, und dies schon seit Jahren."8 In another unfinished chapter "Staatsanwalt" K. attributes to the early death of his father and the mistaken tenderness of his mother a childish quality he possesses.9 Thus despite her 'blindness' the mother is implicated in K.'s fate. But the conscious recognition of his mother remains in the background; for several years he had intended to visit her, but he had never done so, and the fragment ends before the visit is made.

That the characters are projections of K.'s mind appears again in his interview with the advocate who at once knows all about K.'s case although, as K. reflects, this advocate is attached to the court at the Palace of Justice, not to the one with the skylight. As he ponders this incongruity the Chief Clerk of the Court (the one with the skylight) appears in a corner of the room where K. had not noticed him. The link between the two courts is thus inwardly established for K. The interview progresses and the advocate asks K. no questions; he either talks of his own affairs or strokes his beard. K. is, Kafka shows, his own advocate and as such the facts are known to him. K. learns that since the proceedings are not public, legal records are inaccessible to the accused and to his counsel—

records of earlier acts which in life are often inaccessible because pressed into the unconscious. That this unconscious level is unreasonable and primitive is seen in Huld's remark that the officials are children.10 The court and its officials exist in every life, in every time and place. And K. comments that "so many people seem to be connected with the court."11 The Trial represents man's self-trial to determine his success or failure in the pursuit of an inner ideal. To claim, as critics have, that Kafka's books represent a specific theology, psychology, or philosophy seems to me to miss the point of Kafka's writing which was to embrace all quests without pointing to any one as the way. The search for and following of an inner ideal is an old theme in literature put into words by innumerable writers, but Kafka's distinction seems to lie not in his theme but in his technique which depends to a large extent on his abrogation of the time values of the outer world so that his odyssey is described in terms of the inner world where in the final analysis all our odysseys take place.

"You see, everything belongs to the Court,"12 the painter tells K.—even the girls on the stairs outside the painter's room. When Titorelli opens the door behind his bed, K. recognizes the same Law-Court offices even though the painter lives in a different part of the city. "There are Law-Court offices in almost every attic," Titorelli explains. "Why should this be an exception?"13 And when Huld reflects that "after a certain stage in one's practice nothing new ever happens" he is expressing in different terms the universal nature of the human quest.

The scene in the Cathedral should, therefore, not be interpret-
ed to mean that the end of the quest is to be found in orthodoxy of any kind. Rather the Cathedral symbolizes an inner spiritual goal which has no relation for Kafka to the Cathedral as such.

As K. nears the end of his quest in the Cathedral Square, he is startled by the recollection that even when he was a child the curtains in this square had been pulled down. Inside the Cathedral he watches the verger, whose limp reminds him of his childhood imitation of a man riding horseback. These two simple memories serve as touchstones of the world of objects and of the “full-bodied rise and fall” of life. As links their existence in the passage is important, for through them Kafka reminds us that his purpose is to mirror life, but a life disguised so that it is in the semblance of all lives.

Clemens Heselhaus sums up the question of reality in The Trial by pointing out that the court itself is not real; only the reactions of K. to this unreality are real. Because the court is unreal all suppositions are possible, but only as suppositions, not as fixed truths. One cannot say that the court means this or that. One can only say that the physical realization of the court is made concrete in the physical reactions and deeds which destroy a life.16

II.

Kafka's extraordinary use of symbol, dream and parable16 reaches its culmination in The Castle. Günther Anders writes that the strange element in K.'s experience is not that so much strange happens, but that nothing that happens, even the self-evident, is self-evident. There is no distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary.16 The reader fills in the emotional content, the philosophical content, directed by symbols like the beards of the assistants or the soft luxuriousness of the sleigh cushions. Normal space and time values are abrogated so that reality is that which exists within the mind, not independent of it.

When K. returns to the inn early in Chapter 2 of The Castle, he is surprised to see that darkness has set in. ‘Had he been gone for such a long time? Surely not for more than an hour or two, by his reckoning. And it had been morning when he left.’17 As in Kafka's short story “A Common Confusion” the length of the trip does not determine the time it takes. Kafka does not write: “K.'s trip seemed to take a whole day.” Rather despite all of K.'s outward reckonings, the inner time of the subconscious mind prevails, and it is actually dark when K. reaches the inn. The Castle is related in terms of the primitive, unreasoned drives and evaluations of our unconscious lives which for Kafka are more real than what appears on the surface as distorted reflections of these lives. Barnabas' speed in outstripping K. is so great that before K. can shout to him he has covered an impossible distance. Thus time again is observed through an unconscious estimate of it, and Barnabas is characterized in terms of a speed experience.

Another insight into Kafka's approach to time comes when dragged on by Barnabas, K. recreates a scene from childhood evoked by the difficulty of “keeping up.” He finds himself by an old church in a marketplace surrounded by a graveyard, in turn surrounded by a high wall. K. had failed to climb the wall until one morning in an empty marketplace,
flooded by sunlight, he had succeeded. The sense of triumph of
that moment returns now to succor him. Evoked by a chance ex-
perience, the past becomes present.
One notices that throughout The Castle Kafka avoids measuring
time. For instance, when K. goes to see the superintendent in Chap-
ter 5 there is no mention of how many days or hours later this visit
occurred after he left Frieda and the landlady. Thus the reader is
shocked to learn from Pepi at the end of the book that only four days
have elapsed since Frieda left her work at the bar. It is, of course,
part of Kafka's technique to reveal this only at the end where it does
not distort his time values which are not of calendar or clock. That
the inner time of the mind prevails in the book is suddenly proved by
Pepi's remark which is incredible except on the level of idea. Earlier
in the book to learn the day would have only oriented us to conve-
tional time values and spoiled the effect of the allegory. But now that
hour and day have ceased to have meaning, to be reminded of them
produces in the reader the surprise that Kafka wishes to induce
so that they suddenly seem much more unreal than the flow of mind
time in which the reader is im-
mersed.
Telephone calls to the castle are
of no avail, for the superintendent
tells K. that all K.'s contacts with
the castle have been illusory, "but
owing to your ignorance of the
circumstances you take them to be
real." All outside contact is il-
lusion. K. mistakenly tries to use
human logic and reason in dealing
with the castle and its officials;
therefore, he and the officials never
talk on the same level, for their
reasoning is incomprehensible to
the human mind. That we inter-
pret our dietsies in human terms,
however, is shown by Kafka when,
for instance, Momus, the secretary,
crumbles salt and carroway seeds
on his paper.
Reality in the village is what the
people make it. Thus Klamm's ap-
pearance fluctuates. He looks one
way in the village and another way
on leaving it. He looks different
when he is awake from the way he
looks when he is asleep. On one
point only all the villagers agree—
he wears always a black morning
coat with long tails. The differ-
ences, Kafka explains, are the re-
sult of the mood of the observer—
of his degree of excitement, hope,
or despair. They are the varied
impressions that the supplicant
holds of the features of the oracle,
the confessed of his confessor, or
the patient of his psychoanalyst.
The people's confusion of Momus
and Klamm and Barnabas' doubts
about the real Klamm are also ex-
plained by Kafka's concept of real-
ity. Likewise, in a passage deleted
by Kafka, K. feels as if Barnabas
is two men whom only K., not out-
side judgment, can keep distinct.
Barnabas, the messenger, and Bar-
nabas, the brother and son, do not,
therefore, ever really merge for the
reader but remain, as for K., differ-
ent, one of the castle, the other of
the village. This points to the real
nature of the Barnabas symbol—
the man divided by having only
partially attained his goal. Reality
depends then on the observer, not
on a set of unchanging values. Fe-
lix Weltscb sees in these "Doppel-
wesen" a comic element. "Eine
Zweihet, die also Einheit erkannt
wird, und eine Einheit, die immer
wieder in Zweihet zerfällt."20
The castle dignitaries have the
distinction of being freed from
memory. Although K. challenges
the landlady's remark about
Klamm's memory as "improbable and indemonstrable," we are told by Kafka that anyone whom Klamm "stops summoning he has forgotten completely, not only as far as the past is concerned, but literally for the future as well."21 K. himself has practically no past; we hear hardly anything of earlier events in his life. The other characters as well are without childhood or ancestors. True, Frieda claims a childhood acquaintance with Jeremiah with whom she played on the slope of the castle hill, and K. accuses Frieda of having succumbed to the influence of memories, the past, in her "actual present-day life,"22 but for all practical purposes there is no distant past in The Castle. With the exception of the story Olga tells K. or the hints of the landlady's affair with Klamm, there is little perspective in even the recent past. The larger racial past of the human species is, however, often implied in the allegory, for the subconscious level of the mind is, of course, much concerned with our primitive origins. Thus one sees, for example, in the connection of the villagers and K. to the castle the bafflement of man in relation to forces of nature and in relation to deity. Kafka, however, seems to imply that too much concern with the immediate and individual past clutters the mind, for the officials have no memory. It is well to note, nevertheless, that it is only the officials who lack memory of a dismissed case.23 The villagers and K. do have memory, though it is little exercised because The Castle is written in the realm of dream where the past is disguised and integrated with the present.

Kafka probes deep by placing his entire story on the unconscious level. For Kafka past and present are bound together indistinguishably in the symbols and shadows of his dream world.24 As in a dream, all that goes on is known at once by everyone in the village; for instance, the maids enter the room to move in with all their clothes hardly after K. has spoken the words accepting the post at the school. The landlady is aware of all that happens to K. as is everyone K. meets. This disconcerting state of affairs is further evidence of the dream atmosphere of the book, for in a dream our enemies and friends alike know with unerring certitude all the hidden embarrassments and decisions of our lives.25

As the culmination of Kafka's work, The Castle depicts general themes: the alienation of man, the incomprehensibility of the divine, the quest of the hero for the fulfillment of an ideal. Behind Kafka's theme lies a concept of time based on the reality of idea which gives rise to his technique ofparable couched in a dream world. Kafka's attitudes toward time and reality alone make possible his method of writing. Reality is of the mind; therefore the dream is real and our ideas are real.

Kafka's emphasis on the dream world and interest in an inner reality spring from a great many sources.26 Primarily his whole attitude toward reality is deeply colored by his personal problems of adjustment to life. His relationships to his family, to the women to whom he was engaged, to Milena were painful ones. As a Jew his relationship to the community was also an involved one. These unsolved relationships led to conflicts between the inner and the outer man, so that he eventually took cover in his writing behind the highly complicated screen of symbol and par-
able as a refuge from the impingements of the world of action and events. Thus the doctrine of ideas is for Kafka a successful defense. In The Castle we find Kafka's dream world and his idea of truth.

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3 Franz Kafka, The Trial, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York, 1937), p. 43. Quotations have been taken from translations of the originals when they were available.
4 Der Prozess, p. 257.
5 Der Prozess, p. 272.
6 The Trial, p. 69.
7 The Trial, p. 113.
8 Der Prozess, p. 247.
9 Der Prozess, pp. 253-254.
10 The Trial, p. 154
11 The Trial, p. 170.
12 The Trial, p. 189.
13 The Trial, p. 206.
15 Erich Kahler in his excellent discussion of Kafka's technique in “Untergang und Ubergang der epischen Kunstform” (Neue Rundschau, LXIV (1953), 1-44) points out that Kafka's stories move in a sphere which transcends the senses. His characters live daydreams in which vision and speculation are one. Since by the symbol thought is directed from the concrete to the abstract and by allegory thought is directed from the abstract to the concrete, Kahler rejects both these terms as descriptive of Kafka's works. He prefers to call them parables. “Die modern Parabel spielt auf einer Ebene von äusserster Abstraktion und Anonymität;” Kahler writes. (p. 38)
Although Kafka's work does have many elements in common with the parable, I do not feel that this term is sufficient to describe the technical complexity of the novels which include symbols within the parables and in which the parable is often couched in terms of the dream. Furthermore, Kafka's parables lack the outspoken didactic purpose of most works in this form.
18 For a discussion of Max Brod's arrangement of the material in The Trial (one which may cast doubt also on his arrangements in The Castle) see Hermann Uyttersprot, “Zur Struktur von Kafka's 'Der Prozess',” Revue des Langues Vivantes (1953), pp. 332-76.
19 The Castle, p. 95.
21 The Castle, p. 109.
22 The Castle, p. 325.
23 Some critics understand Kafka's officials as our deities, for as Secretary Burgel remarks, “We recognize no difference between ordinary time and working time.” Edwin Muir sees in Kafka's world the influence of “Kierkegaard's doctrine of incommensurability of divine and human law.” “Excerpts from Final Passages of The Castle,” trans. Sophie Prombaum in

24 The long winters in the village lend an atmosphere of darkness fitting to the dream. In fact, spring and summer seem to Pepi no longer than two days. "Excerpts from Final Passages of 'The Castle'" in A Franz Kafka Miscellany, p. 94.

25 Kafka's dream is overburdened by anxieties, for almost all of the villagers seem to be hostile, indifferent, or fearful toward K.

26 Emphasis on an inner reality may be seen in many of the authors read by Kafka. In both the biography by Brod and the diaries Kafka's interest in Plato is mentioned. In the movement of German "poetic nihilism" Kafka read and admired Grillparzer and Stifter. He was especially interested in Grillparzer's "Der arme Spielmann" with its theme of a transcendant reality for the artist and in Stifter's Der Nachsommer in which the characters are scarcely more than incidental in the presenting of Stifter's idea of the permanent character of truth. Furthermore, he had read, Brod writes, Flaubert's The Temptation of St. Anthony and A Sentimental Education. In both of these books Flaubert's devotion to idea is strong. In fact, in the former all movement is in the realm of the spirit. The theme of a transcendant reality may also be seen in Goethe, Kleist, and Hölderlin, all of whom Kafka read.