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I

DAVID CONSTANTINE

Kafka's writing and our reading

It is not always helpful to know what a writer thinks about the vocation and the act of writing, but in Kafka's case it may be. It may help us to read him better. In letters and diaries he says many things about writing in general and about his own in particular which, illuminating in themselves, may also do a real service. They may alert us to the peculiarity of his novels and stories, and so to how we might best try to read them. Certainly, there is no key to Kafka, but just as certainly there are better and worse ways of reading him. Had I needed a motto, I could have looked to some bleakly courageous little sentences in Beckett's *Worstward Ho*. They are: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'¹ They seem to me a noble epitaph for Kafka's writing and a good injunction for our reading.

Writing

The premise is necessity. Writers have to write. They are not necessarily people to whom writing comes more easily than to others nor do they necessarily enjoy writing, in any usual sense of the word 'enjoy'. They are people who have to write. Friedrich Hölderlin's friend Christian Neuffer, who certainly thought of himself as a poet and wrote a great deal of verse, all of it bad, told Hölderlin one day that he was taking a break from poetry for a while – 'hanging my harp up on the wall' was his actual phrase. Hölderlin replied: 'And that is fine, if you can do it without pangs of conscience. Your sense of yourself is founded on other worthwhile activities too, and so you are not annihilated if you are not a poet.'² Hölderlin knew he was 'annihilated' – *vernichtet*, made nothing – if he could not write poetry. And Tasso (Goethe's at least) said:

If I am not to ponder things and write poetry
Then life to me will not be life at all.³

He compared himself to the silkworm, spinning the stuff out of his own body, and having no option, even if it killed him. Kafka's was an extreme

version of that necessity. And he further developed, to an extreme degree, the unhappy possibility contained in the image of the silkworm: that though life without writing was no life at all – he was *vernichtet* (annihilated) if he could not write – life with writing, in writing, was fatal also.

The premise is: Kafka had to write. And it is important to understand at the outset that the premise is thoroughly paradoxical. For the sake of his very life he had to do something harmful, possibly fatal to his life.

Along with necessity comes bad conscience. But why should you feel bad – blameworthy, guilty – about something you have to do? And yet very often and certainly in Kafka's case writing brings bad conscience with it like its shadow.

There are two main reasons for Kafka's bad conscience about his writing. The first is that whatever he writes and however well he writes it he feels that it could have come out better. He feels he is to blame that it didn't come out better. And the second reason for his bad conscience lies in his always asking himself the question: however good the writing is, what good is it anyway? That question is fundamental. What justifies the activity which for him is a necessity? Being necessary doesn't of itself amount to a justification.

Take the second reason first: Kafka has a bad conscience about his writing, however well he does it, he asks what good it is, because in his eyes much more apparent than any good is an immense harm, to himself and to anyone in close dealings with him. Kafka's diaries and letters document ad nauseam the harm his writing does. He observes with morbid satisfaction the terrible specialization that, for him, being a writer entails: 'Everything that isn't literature bores me and I hate it because it disturbs me or holds me up' (*TB2*: 193). His personality has impoverished itself, to serve one purpose: writing:

It is easy to recognise in me a concentration on writing. When it became clear in the organism of myself that writing was the most fruitful direction my being could take then everything ran to that point and all my other capabilities, at first directed towards the pleasures of sex, drinking, philosophy, music, they were all left empty. In all those directions I became emaciated. That was necessary, because my powers in their sum total were so slight that only when gathered together could they even half serve the purpose of writing. (*3.I.12*; *TB1*: 264)

It is like the monstrous hypertrophy of one organ. I leave aside the question – though it needs asking – whether in Kafka it really was that bad and whether he appeared so deformed to other people. The diaries and letters are a sort of trying out the worst about himself, perhaps to exorcise it or as an act of apotropaic magic. But in that version of himself he is a person specialised to the point of deformity and incurable damage by his vocation. And his doubts and bad conscience about that vocation are inevitably nourished by

Kafka's writing and our reading

witnessing the damage which, in his view, it inflicts. And inflicts not just on him. Kafka also took satisfaction in the understanding of himself as, for instance, the ruin of Felice Bauer and her family:

My relationship with the family only makes sense to me in a unified way if I understand myself as that family's ruin. It is the only organic explanation there is, one that quite overrides whatever in my relationship might otherwise be astonishing. (5.XXI.14; *TB3*: 60-1)

If that were true, how good, and of what enormous good, would writing have to be to compensate?

The more obvious reason for Kafka's bad conscience – and commoner in writers, I should say – came from his feeling that his writing could be better and that he is to blame that it isn't. He berates himself for not writing to the limit of his abilities or for not giving himself up to it wholly. For example: 'Have worked since August, in general not a little and not badly, but neither in the first respect nor in the second to the limits of my ability, as I ought to have done' (31.XII.14; *TB3*: 68). He is dissatisfied because he does not have the courage to create the circumstances in which writing could be done with more chance of success. This latter stricture often boils down to the flat antithesis between writing and his job. Kafka at the office, Kafka at his desk, Kafka in dealings with his boss at the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute for the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague is a richly and blackly funny topic. Having stayed up all night writing 'The Judgement', he sent in a note next morning saying he would be late on account of a little dizzy spell. He wrote to Felice that he looked about him at work with such looks as perhaps had never been seen in an office before (3.XII.12; *BF*: 153). He lived in a contradiction – 'Writing/Office' – that was damaging to him not least in that (so he felt) it demonstrated his failure to assert himself as a writer; thus, his cowardice. Naturally, this proof added itself daily to the piles of proof against him in the court of his own conscience. In October 1914, having taken a week's leave to get on with *The Trial* and having after three days got nowhere, he asked himself: 'Are these three days enough for me to conclude that I am not worthy to live without the office?' (7.X.14; *TB3*: 39). But if he was unfit for life without the office, with it he was living a life that denied his writing its proper chance. 'In the office I answer my obligations outwardly, but not my inner obligations and every one of those not satisfied grows into an unhappiness that stays in me for ever' (28.III.11; *TBI*: 31). He notes against himself every occasion when he fails to give writing its proper chance; when he fails to organise his day so as to have time – and the best time is the hours of the night – in which to write. Whenever he idles, whenever he wastes his hours, whenever he lies on the sofa and instead of sleeping, which would

strengthen him for the writing at night, only broods and daydreams, he notes it in the diary against himself. Sleeplessness itself – caused by writing, he says (02.X.11; *TBI*: 43) – becomes blameworthy, sleep something he has ceased to deserve. He writes to Milena that sleep is an innocent thing and for that reason will not visit a man like him (4.V.20; *BM*: 11). On 21 January 1922 (*TB3*: 203–4) he sleeps till 5am, feels himself unworthy of such a blessing, undoes the good effects of the sleep in brooding on his unworthiness. And if he doesn't sleep, the next day will be wasted. The office will exhaust him, he won't be able to write. On many days in his diaries he lays the stigma of his failure to write. Thus here in the summer of 1912: 'Wrote nothing [...] Wrote almost nothing [...] Today wrote nothing [...] For so long now have written nothing [...] Wrote nothing [...] Nothing, nothing' (*TB2*: 73, 74, 76).

So he fails to write; or he writes and the writing is a failure. And what would success matter? Would it outweigh the damage done by trying? He doubts it.

Kafka's notorious self-loathing is, as he perceives it, in large measure caused by writing: by failing to write, by not writing well enough, by the damage that trying and failing to write causes. And that condition of acute dissatisfaction with himself, largely caused by writing, then often becomes the stuff of the writing itself. It is a vicious circle, peculiarly vicious; and yet at the same time potentially redemptive. Writing is not only the cause of much of the misery and the means of its expression but is also, potentially, the means by which the writer might get free of it. He held out that possibility to Felice Bauer: 'Who knows, the more I write and the more I liberate myself, all the purer perhaps and worthier I shall be for you' (24.XI.12; *BF*: 117). And two years later he set that possibility down as his only hope:

In utter helplessness wrote scarcely 2 sides. Fell back a great deal today, despite the fact that I had slept well. But I know that I must not give way if I am to get over the lowest sufferings of my writing – writing that the rest of my life is holding down – and come into the larger freedom which is perhaps awaiting me. (1.X.14; *TB3*: 38)

This is an extension of the paradox we began with. Writing is simultaneously the affliction and, potentially, the means by which that affliction can be escaped from and left behind. Josef K.'s 'arrest' works similarly: affliction and opportunity; as does also, perhaps, Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis. Both are – quite bizarrely – liberated as a result of the awful change in their circumstances, which leads in both cases to a miserable death.

If I say that the writing might be redemptive, I mean that the hope is it will do more than merely neutralise the ill effects of the vocation of writing itself; I mean it might enable a breakthrough out of loneliness, out of anxiety, out

of guilt and self-hatred into the fullness of life in dealings with others. The fact that Kafka never felt it did do that for him is sad, for him; but not, I think, any proof that the writings might not do it now for others, his readers.

The premise in paradox is worth insisting on. It ought to prepare us for paradox in the work and deter us from saying that things must be this or that. They are more likely, in Kafka, to be this and that, in contradiction.

One unhappy effect of reading Kafka's diaries is that cumulatively they may persuade you that he is indeed as abject as he makes himself out to be. Imagining with pleasure, after an interval of not being able to, the turning of a knife in his heart; assessing where exactly it would be best to insert the point of a knife into his neck; dissolving, as he puts it, in sadness and uselessness; watching himself like his own self-appointed torturer . . . When he gave his diaries to Milena to read, then asked: 'Have you found anything decisively against me in the diaries?' (19.1.22; *TB*3: 202), did he trust her to dismiss all the evidence he had accumulated against himself? The lovelessness depicted in so much of Kafka's writing has its source in his own inability to love himself. 'I have loving people but I cannot love' (29.1.22; *TB*3: 212). Nobody can love in return who will not acknowledge that the person loving him may after all have grounds.

A context and perhaps the grounds for self-hatred come with the ideology (and its practice in familial and social structures) that the victim inherits or succumbs to. Gerard Manley Hopkins in the grip of the Jesuits is an example. The so-called 'Terrible Sonnets' excite not only pity but also regret: that a man should ever allow himself into dealings with such a brutal creed. And one salutary movement in those sonnets, almost a revolt, is the concession that he ought to be kinder on himself. Hopkins writes:

My own heart let me more have pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet.⁴

Kafka too, suffering like Hopkins in the grip of forces inimical to life and, like Hopkins, often siding with them against himself, does also from time to time concede the need for kindness towards himself. Thus after some terrible collapse in January 1922: 'Be content, learn (learn, now forty years of age,) to rest in the moment' (18.1.22; *TB*3: 199). He even concedes he may not be wholly lost: 'I admit [. . .] that there are possibilities in me [. . .] that a good-for-nothing can become a decent human being, a decent and a happy human being' (26.11.22; *TB*3: 222). But there are few such concessions, in all the years.

Many writers have had a poor opinion of themselves and their achievements. But the gap in Kafka's case between his own and the world's

estimation of him is peculiarly wide. How does a man so persuasively (in the diaries and letters) depicting himself as only fit to die ‘like a dog’, as Josef K. had it, then in the eyes of the world, if not in his own, redeem himself? The answer is: through fictions; and again the example of Hopkins will serve to illustrate the familiar paradox that a man in a poem lamenting his inability to build, make, create is actually doing just that in the very process of lamenting that he can’t. The sonnet ‘Thou art indeed just, Lord . . .’ concludes:

See, banks and brakes
 Now, leavèd how thick! Lacèd they are again
 With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
 Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
 Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
 Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.⁵

I have been viewing Kafka’s diaries in an unfair light, seeking out the worst. In fact the personal complaints in them are interspersed with and greatly outweighed by bits and pieces (some very substantial) of fiction: the beginnings, the continuations, the fragments of stories. And these are all, each and every one of them, steps in the direction of release and redemption. As is also in the diaries the abundant evidence of close, sustained, and lively attention paid to events and to other people. Day by day Kafka tries to set down exactly what an event and what the interactions of people in it were like. And there are many glimpses of other people, particularly girls and women, on the street. All these accounts, some brief, some quite lengthy, count as writing; they are assessed, like the attempts at fiction, as pieces of writing: good or less good, bad or less bad. Writers write because they have to, and every sentence they write comes with its own criteria for success or failure. All sentences can be written more or less well. All come with an injunction to be written as well as possible. Understood like that, writing, for a writer, is indivisible from life.

Thus we may see not only the fictions and the accounts of happenings and people in Kafka’s daily life as pieces of writing all charged with the potential of success or failure, but also the complaints about and the enquiries into his own unhappy condition may be viewed in that same light. The making of sentences, even on the narrow subject of himself, is – potentially – redemptive, because in that exercise, as in all his other writing, he is trying to arrive at truth, clear truth, truth in the form of clarity. And it might be that if on the subject of himself he can arrive at truth, if he can understand the subject ever more clearly, perhaps that truth will set him free.

Perhaps. There are obvious risks. Clear formulation of the problem of himself is not a solution of the problem; at most it is a basis from which to

go forward towards one. Indeed, formulating, ever more clearly, truths about himself can become a masochistically self-delighting end in itself. Kafka knew that perfectly well. Hence his grave doubts about the value of his own facility with words.

And another reason why making truthful sentences out of his own misery might not liberate him from that misery is this: he risks doing it so well, so persuasively, that his unfitness to live becomes quite indisputable. The hope must be that the creative charge released in the making of sentences, even on the unhappy subject of oneself, will actually counter the revealed misery of their material; but the procedure is risky. Fictions are a better bet.

The more Kafka turns to fictions, the better. That way hope lies. But the fictions themselves, in his assessment, are constant failures. He thinks of himself as a writer with failing powers. He looks back on earlier work, itself a failure, as achievements beyond his present ability. Was there ever a writer so convinced of failure? All writers are, more or less. Failure is intrinsic in writing. It is there most palpably in the gap between conception and realisation:

Certainly everything I have already conceived even word for word in a good feeling or perhaps only incidentally but in definite words, at the desk, trying to write it down, it all appears dry, wrong, unmoving, an obstacle to everything around it, anxious and above all full of holes, even though nothing of the original conception has been forgotten. (15.XI.II; *TBI*: 95)

The conception, or invention, lingers, as an affront to its sorry realisation in the medium of words. But the palpable gap, though deeply disappointing, is that without which the writer would not be driven on and on to write. The gap is the motor of writing: it wants filling. After every failure the imagination lifts itself up, and again the inadequate powers of realisation come struggling after. Precisely through failure comes a sense of superabundance, of the excess of life over art, of life's intractability by art, of life's irreducibility. This may be the despair of the writer at the time, but it is the truth, and writing that constantly comes up against and acknowledges that truth serves life (and our lives) better than any art proceeding in the illusion that it should or could ever master life. The passage quoted above continues, in explanation of the failure:

The chief reason is of course that I have good conceptions only away from the paper at the time of the uplifting of my spirit – an uplifting I fear more than I long for it, however much I do long for it – but that then the abundance is so great I have to refrain and out of the stream of it take blindly what I can in snatches and by chance so that when it comes to a thoughtful writing down my acquisition is nothing in comparison with the abundance in which it lived and is incapable of fetching that abundance in and is thus something bad and distracting because it tempts me uselessly. (15.XI.II; *TBI*: 95)

One obvious form of failure is not finishing. Kafka finished none of his three novels and – relatively (relative to the number he began) – very few of his short stories. True, unfinishedness may be viewed not as failure but as a virtue; Romantic poetics makes a virtue of it. The unfinished text is one still under way, in process; unfinishedness is appropriate, truthful. We must come back to that positive view later, but say now that there is no doubt that Kafka wanted to finish his novels, did his level best to, and abandoning them felt he had failed.

And failure is apparent more immediately, in every step of the process itself. A paragraph, a single sentence, often seems to Kafka to be failure manifest. If writing comes out of bodily and spiritual uneasiness, then failure to compose adequate sentences only compounds that unhappy existential state. Failed sentences, when the words won't fit, when they fail to cohere and do not amount to anything, cause their author acute distress:

Almost no word I write fits with any another, I can hear the consonants rubbing together like bits of tin and the vowels sing along like black slaves up for sale. My doubts encircle every word, I see them sooner than I see the word.

(15.XII.10: TB1: 103)

Or he writes a passage, an entity on a particular subject, scrutinises it and decides at once that only a morsel of it has validity. Thus, on 10 and 12 March 1912, what might be the beginnings of two stories: he breaks off and comments on the first:

Nothing, nothing ... I was involved, and then only feebly, at 'Later he had to ...', especially at the word 'tip'. In the description of the landscape I did think, for a moment, that I was seeing something right. (TB2: 52)

And on the second: 'Only the billowing greatcoat stands its ground, all the rest is invented' (58).

Thus the whole enterprise is riddled with failure. Single paragraphs perish under his look. The large works peter out.

Insisting so much on failure, Kafka has at the same time a very clear idea of what success would be like. Indeed, his sense of failure is born out of and nourished by his intense imagining of success. After 1912, his most productive and successful year, his *annus mirabilis*, as he thought, the year of 'The Judgement', 'The Metamorphosis', *The Man who Disappeared*, that imagining twins itself with remembering. It seems to him, looking back, that he could do it once, that he did do it, that he had it in him to succeed. He is left with the dreadful anxiety that perhaps he missed his chance: 'Always this chief anxiety: Had I set off in 1912 in the full possession of all my abilities with a clear head, not eaten up by the efforts to suppress my living

abilities!' (25.XII.15; *TB3*: 116). Letters and diaries of 1912, needless to say, were littered with self-beratings and harsh verdicts on his achievements.

Typically – because much of what can be said about Kafka's writing is existential rather than literary, that is it concerns a disposition and achievement of the personality, it concerns how a person *is* – typically, his rare exultation, his feeling of success, belongs to the manner of writing as much as or even more than to the produced text. And 'manner' is quite the wrong word, quite inadequate. I really mean the whole bodily and psychic state of the man in the act of writing. The achievement of that state, in which, out of which, successful writing will be more likely to come, is itself cause for exultation or, since he rarely achieves it, for continual fretting after it and self-recrimination that he fails to allow or induce it.

Immediately after the writing of 'The Judgement', almost uniquely in the diaries, there is an entry that is almost self-satisfied: 'I wrote this story 'The Judgement' in one go during the night of the 22nd to the 23rd between 10pm and 6am.' After that night of ability he said: 'That is the only way to write [. . .] with such complete opening up of body and soul' (23.IX.12; *TB2*: 101). The imagery he uses to describe this success is that of birth or the sudden and beneficial breaking open of a wound. Again and again in his injunctions to himself he urges the recovery of a state in which writing would break forth from him, in which he would be borne along by it: 'End of writing. When will it take me up again?' (20.I.15; *TB3*: 73). It is an imagery of going down, of sinking down, of diving:

There are some connections that I feel clearly but am not in a position to know. It would be enough to dive a little bit deeper, but there the lift is so strong that I could believe myself to be on the bottom did I not feel the pull of the currents under me. Anyway, I look up, to where the light comes from and in its thousands of fragments breaks on me. I climb, and drift around on the surface, even though I hate everything on the surface.

(undated; *TB3*: 12)

Malcolm Pasley speaks of Kafka in the act of writing as 'listening' (particularly to sound and rhythm and punctuating accordingly),⁶ and that image might be extended and developed: listening to and attending very precisely and intently to something taking place; a quite peculiarly intense concentration, which is both passive – an opening up of himself to something in the process of occurring – and keenly active in its attending, and in the hand hurrying across the page.

In the subordination of the self to the process of writing the self is, for that time, forgotten. In that primary sense (there are others) writing may be understood as release and redemption.

The preferred ambience for this kind of writing is the night. It is cause for frequent complaint and self-recrimination in Kafka's life that he could not or did not sufficiently well organize the day and so did not have the hours of the night for writing in. For example:

End of one chapter a failure, and another one, which I began well, I'll scarcely or rather definitely not be able to continue that well, whereas it would certainly have come right back then during the night. (TB₃: 37)

And

Saw again that everything written down in a fragmented way and not in the course of the larger part (or even the whole) of a night is inferior and that by the circumstances of my life I am condemned, precisely, to what is inferior. (TB₃: 62)

To sum up so far. Kafka was a writer for whom writing was an existential necessity. It was a cause of guilt in his life because of the damage it did. But it was also his best chance of preserving and asserting himself in the world. He called it 'My struggle for the preservation of myself' (31.VII.14; TB₂: 165). It fortified him. He wrote: 'the firmness that the least writing brings about in me is ungainsayable and wonderful' (27.XI.13; TB₂: 209). He spoke of 'the great help that writing is' (13.IX.14; TB₃: 39), of writing as a 'wondrous, mysterious, perhaps perilous, perhaps redemptive consolation' (27.I.22; TB₃: 210). By writing, which might indeed be perilous, which actually risked unfitting him for life itself, he could hope and sometimes believe that he would come through into a greater fullness of life. Successful writing would be for him 'a heavenly releasing and a real coming alive' (3.X.II; TB₁: 45). But in practice he was chiefly persuaded not of the possibility of redemption but of the constant presence of failure. He fails to finish, his powers are failing, but he has a luminous sense of what success would be like. The state of body and soul in which successful writing might take place is one of deep concentration on a developing event. Night, at least so long as he is still in employment and especially whilst still living at home, is the most propitious time for the attempt. The writing of 'The Judgement', in the night at one sitting, becomes emblematic of how it should be done. He notes in December 1914 'Yesterday wrote 'The Village Schoolmaster', almost unconsciously' (19.XII.14; TB₃: 65); said of 'The Metamorphosis' that it should have been written in at most two sessions (each ten hours long) and thought it irredeemably spoilt when he had to interrupt it with a business trip.

I said earlier that failure, or an intense awareness of the gap between conception and execution, is the motor of writing, but I should add that, of course, so too are the glimpses of success, the exultant moments of

achievement. The two conditions may actually be one and the same, turning a different face. And by both the writer is driven on to write.

The efforts to achieve a successful writing are like the endeavours, largely unsuccessful but persistent, of several of Kafka's heroes to reach a goal, get at a truth, arrive at some clarity, stability, state of belonging; which does not mean that Kafka's fictions are *about* writing, but that writing is a means (*the* means for Kafka) of trying to get at truth and often the heroes of his fictions are trying to do just that. They are trying to do what the writing itself is trying to do. The process of writing and its subject are allied. And the third constituent of the whole endeavour is our reading, which must undergo what the writer and his heroes undergo: bafflement and thwarting, hope in glimpses, and disappointment and failure in large measure.

Reading

There are different ways of reading as there are of writing. How should we read Kafka? Bearing in mind how his fictions were written, and what in his case the profession and act of writing entailed, how for the greatest pleasure and profit should they be read?

It is easier to say how not. And I feel some justification in trying that way since definition through the negative, getting some sense of how things are through how they manifestly aren't, is very much the way that Kafka in his fictions tries himself.

Kafka's fiction is, as Robert Lowell said a poem is, an event, not the record of an event.⁷ It is in process, it is underway. It is a means by which the clarification of truth may be arrived at and the life of its author and the lives of its readers may be changed. The truth is not in the writer's possession when he starts, his writing is not the recording or recounting of a truth he is already master of; his writing is his laborious struggle towards that truth. Understood thus, the writing requires our participation in that laborious process. Everything about the fiction – its author, its genesis and most importantly (since we might know nothing about its author or its genesis) its manifest workings – absolutely forbids reductive reading. Any reading that supposes, or in its procedure implies, that Kafka, already in possession of the truth, then merely encoded it in the process of writing, so that the business of literary criticism is *decoding* – any such reading must be wrong. Kafka's fiction is an act of seeking, it is a would-be discovery, invention, engenderer of the truth. Seen thus its unfinishedness is itself expressive. Failure it may be, but in an endeavour very unlikely to succeed. And if the author, sentence by sentence seeking after the truth, fails to arrive, how should the critic?

As an analogy (and perhaps more than that), we might consider the states of guiltiness and anxiety which, as everybody knows, are common in Kafka. Their essence, their peculiar power to harm the individual in their grip, is that they are irreducible. They can't be bindingly ascribed to any particular thing, and so can't be relieved by the removal or the disarming of that thing. Talking to Milena about the anxiety Jews live in, Kafka describes the state as one of always feeling threatened. Threatened by what? 'By threats' (30.v.20; *BM*: 26). And guilt in Kafka never has the simple relationship to transgression, punishment, and release contained in the root sense of the German word *Schuld*, namely 'debt'. Guiltiness and anxiety are not the whole of Kafka, but they do condition much of his writing and being themselves irreducible they are an expressive analogy of the irreducibility of the writing itself.

Reading reductively is reading acquisitively. The supposition behind it – quite false, in my view – is that the text contains a finished truth, there to be had. But Kafka's texts are laced with indicators that the truth cannot be had. Kafka is one author for the reading of whom mere observation and description of what goes on in the texts may help as much as interpretative criticism. Here a few such observations. They concern motifs in and characteristics of the stories which demonstrate that understanding is, to say the least, a problem and that the search for the truth, though it has to be attempted, is laborious and probably neverending.

Failure to arrive, failure to understand

K. never gets into the Castle; Josef K. gets nowhere in his understanding of his case; Karl Roßmann merely repeats the essentials of his predicament.

Failure even to begin

In 'An Imperial Message', for example, and more than once in the diaries there is an imagery, almost a doctrine, not of progress but of infinite regression. Thus: 'If there is such a thing as metempsychosis then I am not yet at the lowest stage. My life is the hesitation before birth' (24.I.22; *TB3*: 207). And:

I don't know that anybody's task was ever this hard. You might say it isn't a task, not even an impossible one, it is not even impossibility itself, it is nothing, it is not even as much a child as a barren woman's hope of one. And yet it is the air I breathe, so long as I am to breathe. (21.I.22; *TB3*: 203)

Reducing a goal or a desired effect almost, but not quite, to vanishing point is very kafkaesque. Bureaucracy is the most developed image of this.

Kafka's writing and our reading

Puzzlement

Often the narrative voice is a puzzled one. A narrator, in the act of narrating, is trying to make sense of an event or a phenomenon. Thus in 'Josephine, the Songstress'. Or again and again in the novels the hero, in his innocence or ignorance, has things explained to him by people who may know better. Altogether, in novels and stories, there is a very great deal of discussion, explanation and interpretation of behaviour.

Exegesis of texts

Letters from Klamm, for example. A letter read in the dark, in the wind, by candlelight, subjected to interpretation.

Parables, supposedly helpful or exemplary stories

Notably 'Before the Law', but Amalia's story in *The Castle* works similarly. Kafka was a collector of such emblematic or exemplary stories. He related one such, concerning Dostoevsky, to Milena, and asked her: 'Do you see how mysterious this story is, how incapable of being penetrated by the reasoning mind?' (April/May, 1920; *BM*: 12). Traditionally, in the New Testament, for example, parables are used to make concretely clear a new or abstract or for some other reason difficult concept. Thus Christ answers the question 'Who is my neighbour?' with the parable of the Good Samaritan. But in Kafka's fictions the stories and parables told are never unambiguous and the difficulty the listener is in may only be compounded by hearing them. The gesture of clarification is belied by its effect. Extending this category or observation, which has to do with the belying or failure of traditional gestures and structures, we can point to the disheartening version of the Quest, in *The Castle*, and of the Damascus Road Experience in *The Trial*. K.'s quest founders, the line of it peters out. And Josef K., stopped in his tracks as surely as Saul, never learns which way to go.

The hero's restricted perspective and limited abilities

In the three novels Kafka keeps pretty strictly to his hero's limited perspective on the world. And Josef K. in particular is very poorly equipped to deal with the onus or opportunity laid on him by his arrest. Unlike the 'man from the country', he never gets even a distant glimpse of the radiance of the Law; he sees the Law as squalid. True, as readers we are not wholly confined within the experience of the hero. We can reflect upon it and seek to enlarge it; but by ill-equipping his heroes and by limiting the narrative perspective to theirs,

Kafka surely indicates the enormity of the whole undertaking of his writing and of our reading.

Those observations – and others might be added – prove that the difficulty of understanding, the laborious enquiry after the truth, is not just a subject of Kafka's texts but is their very warp and weft. If that is the nexus out of which they arise, if that is what they are about, if that is actually what constitutes their most characteristic texture and procedures, then they cannot be susceptible of reductive interpretation. Any such reading goes quite against their grain.

Three larger characteristics reinforce that view.

Lucidity, its failure

Kafka's characters are wonderfully able to hypothesise and set out alternatives and endlessly ramifying possibilities. For example, Titorelli presenting the possible outcomes of a trial; or the *Vorsteher* recounting to K. all the past history of the Castle's interest in employing a land-surveyor. Such characters are pedantically, tiresomely, exact in their accounts. They compose sentences adequate to their complicated tasks. And in so doing they rather prove the futility of this, the best, the considerable best, that they can do. Wherever the truth is, it does not seem reachable by that route. The characters actually demonstrate the inadequacy of the means – their considerable powers of argument, discrimination, definition, speculation – at their disposal. They and their author are well equipped, but with something that will not help them. As readers we participate in the failure of their kind of lucid reasoning.

Disproportion, its fundamentally disquieting effect

I mean especially the disproportion between the transgression and the punishment. Thus in *The Man who Disappeared*, 'In the Penal Colony', 'The Judgement'. There is something unbearably worrying about that relationship in a matter of justice. Either the world is thoroughly unjust; or you have not understood its laws; or both. Yes, the ordering of the world is thoroughly unjust. No, you have not understood its laws. This latter possibility haunts *The Trial*.

The story, what is it really about?

We feel it is not really about what it is ostensibly about. Stories of that kind, for example 'The Village Schoolmaster', shift the mind into an anxiety about its ability to grasp things. Or about the status of the reality it is trying to grasp. What is going on? What is *really* going on? A large part of the total

sense of that particular story may actually consist in the uneasy feeling it engenders that whatever it seems to be about it is not really about.

Kafka proceeds through metaphor, not through allegory. Allegory suits a mind already sure of its ideas and chiefly concerned how best to set them down. Between the allegory and the idea you might translate to and from: translate the idea into an allegory, translate the allegory back into its idea. But no such traffic is possible with metaphor. The idea and its concrete realisation are indissolubly fused. The metaphor is the only way of knowing. We might be glad that there is such a way at all, but, typically, Kafka mistrusts even that sole possibility. Indeed, metaphor seems to him to demonstrate the inherent insufficiency of writing. He notes in his diary a metaphorical usage from one of his own letters: 'I warm myself by it in this sad winter'; and comments:

Metaphors are one among many things that make me despair about writing. How unimportant writing is, how dependent on the servant girl lighting the fire, on the cat warming itself by the fire, even on the poor old man warming himself. All these are independent and autonomous activities, only writing is helpless, does not dwell in itself, is a joke, is desperation.

(6.XII.21; TB3: 196–7)

The crucial question is how to increase the autonomy of writing without decreasing its vital contact with and bearing upon real life. Kafka shifts into fictions that are large, finely ramified and autonomous; he dwells in them in writing, and we must in reading. The hunger artist is very anxious to have witnesses there in the cage with him, to see that he does not cheat. It is an image very close to Kafka's own anxiety that in moving away from mimetic and representational art into the greater autonomy of metaphor he is entering a zone where his criteria for success – which is to say, for truthfulness – are no longer obvious. His truth becomes less and less verifiable by anybody else. His chosen mode brings with it the risk of arbitrariness and dishonesty. For a writer as scrupulous and self-doubting as Kafka, that risk is a terrible burden.

Goethe, weary of being asked or told what *Elective Affinities* was about, made a pronouncement that will help in reading Kafka too. He said: 'Once written the thing has rights of its own, and will assert them' (*das Gedichtete behauptet sein Recht*).⁸ We cannot reduce a literary work to the criteria already in our possession. The work is actually engendering the criteria by which it might be judged. The successful work corroborates itself. It is then, like the human activities noted above, independent and autonomous; it dwells in itself. That is what Kafka felt as he wrote 'The Judgement': 'the story confirmed itself as being beyond doubt' (25.IX.12; TB2: 103). Elsewhere he says that if a story (any story) truly has a *raison d'être*, if it is *justified*, then like a seed it will contain its total organisation there already

at its conception (19.XII.14; *TB*₃: 65). It opens then in the act of writing. Invention (*Erfindung*), in the old sense of the word, meant the discovery of something already existent and waiting to be found. The thing is already there, if you can only bring it to the surface. Reading is participation in that invention. It is an entry into, a dwelling in the metaphor being brought by the act of writing into the light. That metaphor does relate – vitally and critically – to our reality, but not as allegory nor as mimetic representation. It is not reducible, not replaceable; nor, since it is not a means to an end, is it discardable. Its relationship to our reality (our lives) is simultaneously enigmatic and indisputable.

Kafka said of ‘The Judgement’: ‘It [the story] is a bit wild and senseless and if it did not have inner truth (which can never be generally established but must on every occasion by every reader or listener be conceded or denied anew) it would be nothing’ (4–5.XII.12; *BF*: 156). Kafka thought of his readers as necessary participants in the process of making sense. Our search for the truth of the text, our conceding it or denying it in the course of every reading, is akin to the writerly and existential process he is involved in, body and soul, himself.

Reading is always a dialectical process, and reading Kafka eminently so. Drawn into his metaphors, dwelling in them while the fictions last, we are nonetheless required to assert our right to contradict. Often his texts, in their depiction of lovelessness, in their reduction of human relations to a matter of relative power, cry out for their own contradiction. He tries out the worst, and in so doing, through the negative, through a palpable absence, conjures up the need for a better way of being in the world. The very urgent social injunction in Kafka’s writing will only be realised if his readers engage with him in the struggle to make sense.

NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1983), p. 1.
2. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Friedrich Beißner and Adolf Beck, 8 vols. (Große Stuttgarter Ausgabe, 1943–85), vol. 6, pp. 243–4.
3. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Tasso*, lines 3081–87.
4. *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman M. Mackenzie (Clarendon: Oxford, 1990), p. 186.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
6. ‘Nachbemerkung’ to *Das Schloß* (*DS*: 390).
7. Quoted in Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber, 1989), p. 129.
8. Letter to Karl Friedrich von Reinhard, 31 Dec. 1809, quoted in Heinz Hartl (ed.), *Die Wahlverwandtschaften: eine Dokumentation der Wirkung von Goethes Roman 1808–1832* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1983), p. 100.